

THE GENTLEMAN IN ARMOR

BY ROBERT J.

CASEY



How René de Bar, Duke of Lorraine, Pursued My Lady of the Firelight, Found Joan of Arc and Led the Army of the Dead

The Gentleman in Armor

*How René de Bar, Duke of Lorraine,
Pursued My Lady of the Fire-
light, Found Joan of Arc and
Led the Army of the Dead*

By ROBERT J. CASEY

René de Bar, Duke of Lorraine, adept with a flashing sword, equally the master of military strategy—skillful alike on his lute in composing chansons to a lovely woman—Ah! a great soldier, gentleman, a great gallant, a vividly passionate lover, was René the Good. History tells us so.

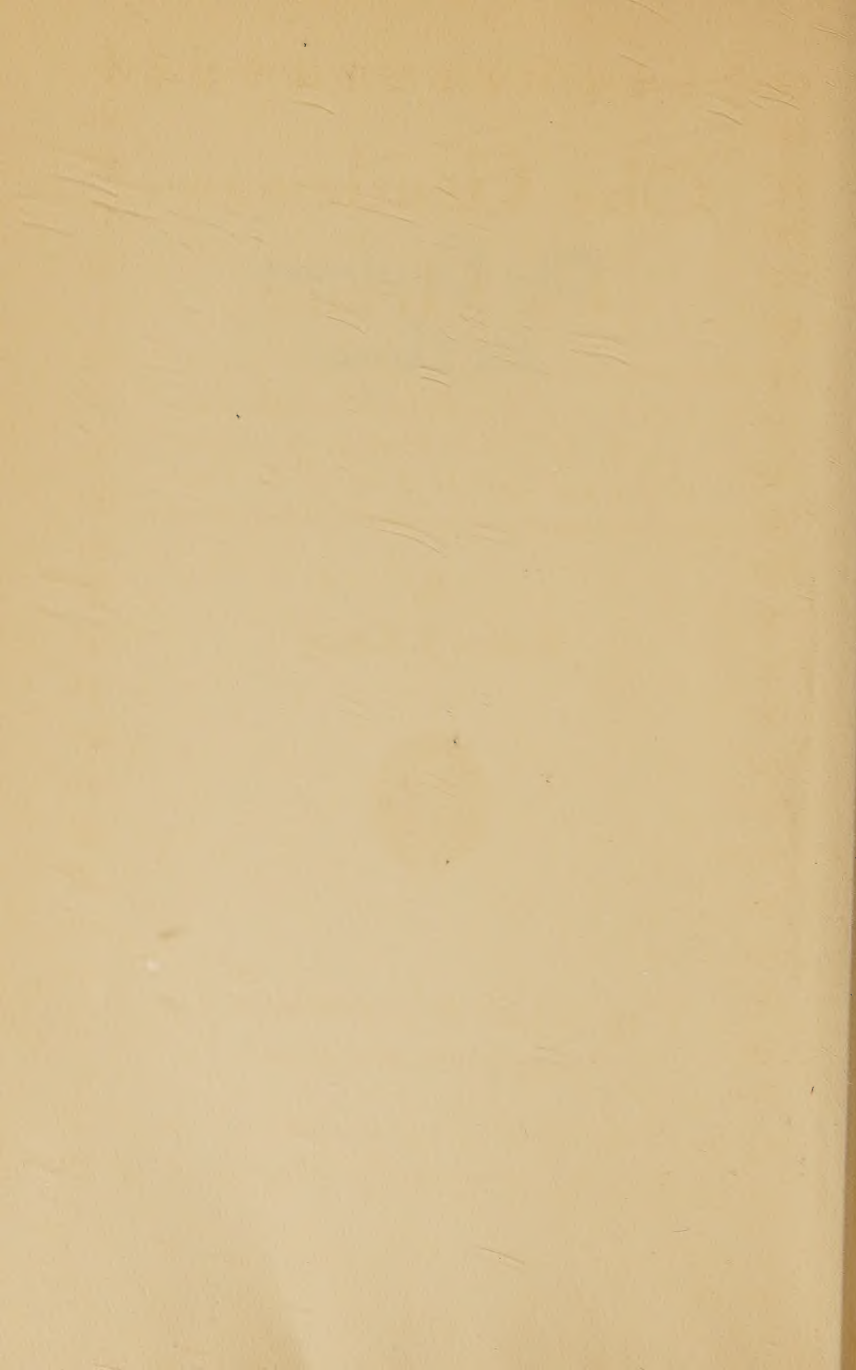
One day on the streets of Nancy, René meets a fragile, shabbily clad girl from Domremy. She fascinates him, this child, with her strange visionary talk about preserving the liberty of France. In the face of the skeptics, he escorts her to the Dauphin.

René rides side by side with Joan to Orleans, Joan slight as the smallest page. Joan raises the siege of Orleans, and the King is crowned at Rheims. Then a stroke of drama parts Joan and René. She goes out of his life to her death.

To René, war is but the gallant gesture of the lover, a symphony in tune with the chansons he plays to his lovely ladies. He battles with his ancient enemy, Charles of Burgundy. First defeated and thrown into prison, he is finally gloriously victorious with his indomitable Army of the Dead. We behold in a climactic moment, a vivid silhouette of two figures on the crest of a hill in herculean combat—René kills Charles.

He attains power, riches, a vast empire. But withal, René, the impassioned lover, pursues "Milady of the Firelight."

The Gentleman
In Armor



The Gentleman In Armor

How Rene of Bar, Duke of Lorraine, Pursued My Lady of the Firelight, Found Joan of Arc and Led the Army of the Dead

By
Robert J. Casey



J. H. SEARS & COMPANY, Inc.

PUBLISHERS ~ NEW YORK

COPYRIGHT, 1927, BY
J. H. SEARS & CO., INCORPORATED

MANUFACTURED COMPLETE BY THE
KINGSPORT PRESS
KINGSPORT, TENNESSEE
United States of America

To Milady of the Firelight

*"And this they say, Seigneurs, that no man
has lived until he has tasted of Love, War
and Poverty."*

PREFACE

UNDER the high altar of the Cathedral at Angers lie the bones of René the Good, King of Naples and Jerusalem and overlord of half a dozen duchies. Which is fortunate. Without that handful of dust as evidence the world would doubt that he ever existed. His bright blade, the finest and cleanest in Europe might be forgotten together with the story of his passionate quest for the Lady of Firelight.

But he did live and does live, seigneurs, and does the amazing record of his accomplishments—in the poems he wrote, in the festivities he instituted, in the church windows he built, in the music he composed and in that gaudy tapestry, the map of Europe which he worked so painstakingly to revise.

It may be as some have set forth that he was not personally present in the smashing of a great empire . . . that his beau geste, crowning episode in a career of magnificent caprice was the poetic conception of Provence where so many things have happened that never have happened at all.

But what odds? Who cares to quarrel with legend—especially a legend that ought to be true? Here, seigneurs, is the chronicle of a great warrior who had no ambition save to sit in the shade of the olive trees and play the lute and to gaze into the unfathomable eyes of a lovely woman. . . . It is said that he played the lute very well indeed.

THE AUTHOR

CONTENTS

	PAGE
Proem	3
Book One: <i>Love</i>	23
Book Two: <i>War</i>	175
Book Three: <i>Poverty</i>	251

Proem

I

YOU will be a great duke, and women will cause you much trouble," declared Boson the astrologer, as he drew closer to the fire, wrapped his black cloak about him and toyed with a golden amulet of Spanish filigree, marked with the seven seals of Babylonian doom.

"I have noticed," said René, with enthusiasm, "that the lutes aren't as good as they used to be. I can't say that the Italians are the best workmen in the world, but when they make a musical instrument they put the material and the time into it. Your Burgundian or Angevine or Frenchman glues a few pieces of wood together and passes it off before the lacquer is dry at the price of a real instrument. It's no wonder music is becoming a lost art."

Under the hood of the broad fireplace in the darkening Hall of the Stag, sat the boy René on a stool of carved oak, stringing a lute with distracted attention. The fire fascinated him as a thing of more interesting thaumaturgy than Boson the Marvelous. There were pictures in the fire, pictures of beautiful faces and men on horseback, flashing arms and languorous gardens. . . .

Boson's cadaverous face became longer by as much as two wrinkles.

"You are not paying attention to me," he boomed. "It is not well to ignore the message of the stars."

"Oh, yes, the stars," agreed René affably, "and what did you say the stars were talking about? . . . About lutes I hope and my prospects for becoming a great musician. I assure you, professor that on a really good lute I could twang a chanson that would tear your heart out. I am not half bad, really, considering the few lessons I have had . . . Pierre of Vaudemont himself says. . . ."

The magician cleared his throat with increased vim.

"I was observing," he said, "that the stars have marked you for a dukedom. . . ."

Now this arrangement, as every one in Lorraine knew quite well, did not presuppose any amount of calculating on the part of the stars. Before he had married little Isabelle of Lorraine, René had been adopted by Louis, the Cardinal Duke of Bar. And since his marriage to the child Isabelle, he had been designated as legal heir to the coronet of Nancy. It would have taken a complete constellation and possibly some comets to alter his chances for a duchy.

"For a dukedom," the wizard repeated. "The stars have so ordered and as I said before, while you were wasting your time on that accursed lute, you will be a chevalier of prowess in the service of the great."

"What a silly idea," commented René.

Boson was so startled that he came close to calamity, my dear seigneurs. He was within a trifle of dropping his amulet, in which event unspeakable catastrophe might have followed. A great rage shook him and his lips became so white that even the ruddy glow of the fire failed to liven them. Here was heresy that a more civilized community, such as say Florence, might have been expected to punish with expeditious and finely worked out tortures.

"What?" he gasped.

"I can make a much better prophecy myself," explained René. "I dare say you're right about the dukedom. Thanks to the muddling of my well meaning relatives I can't very well avoid that. But who could be a warrior nowadays? The sword Flamberge itself could not protect a man in the cast-iron mail that the armorers are turning out to meet the increased demand. They skimp on material and they haven't the first notion of workmanship. I tell you, my magical friend, that this is a commercial age. The country is forgetting its morals. The common ordinary business honesty of my grandfather's time has almost disappeared."

Boson recovered his composure and forced himself to smile. When he spoke it was with greater fluency if less elegance:

"Your grandfather, as I recall him," he observed, "was something of a—shall I say it—a tough citizen. He didn't play on the damned zithern but his broadsword technique was quite commendable. His side stroke and guard could have been improved, of course. But he had a good, two-fisted, overhead swing that was something to look at. . . . Yes, Louis of Anjou could crack a pretty good helmet. I have always remembered it. I have been at some pains to recall his manifest talent to the scoundrels who insist that he was the greatest rogue of his time and should have been hanged in early youth. No man of his gifts should ever be hanged. That, obviously, is preposterous."

"What you say bears out my argument," returned René. "He had the tools to fight with as well as the disposition. Take a look at that gear by the window there—Burgundian chain mail—and King Gondicaire who taught those people how to make armor, turns over in his grave every time he hears the jingle of it.

Look at the blade—Spanish steel and it makes me ashamed that my mother came from Aragon. You will hardly believe me when I say that if I were to bash your skull with it I should turn the edge.”

“In all probability you are right,” admitted the astrologer. “You speak with all the assurance of impetuous youth. But age will bring you a change of vision, my son. You will one day agree with me that equipment means nothing to Destiny. As Destiny decrees, so goes the world.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure about that. Far be it from me to quarrel with the stars and your great gifts of divination. I am only a youth and I have been instructed repeatedly by my strong-armed uncle the Cardinal and my holy mother-in-law the duchess, to defer to the opinions of my elders. But I have noticed frequently that the soldiers whom Destiny has marked to die young are almost always the seigneurs with thin breastplates and second-rate casques. I have observed also that very few good lute players ever die with their visors in the mud.”

The magician looked at him quizzically.

“If I were to dare to doubt what is written in the firmament,” he said, “I should venture to guess that you might become a great sophist. You argue with all the skill of your illustrious relative to whom the unappreciative sometimes refer as the blowhard bishop of Basle. But, my boy, I repeat, it is only the fool who attempts to argue with Destiny.”

His thin old face relaxed a little as he gazed through the gloom at the youth’s lithe silhouette.

“Yes,” he said, “you will be a warrior in spite of yourself. You have your father’s sword-arm, your grandfather’s audacity and your mother’s wit. The stars are right as always. You will be a fighting Duke

and a power in these parts. . . . A splendid destiny for a younger son. . . .”

René shook his head impatiently.

“Duke!” he scoffed. “Doesn’t Destiny deal with anything but the obvious?”

The magician’s mouth opened wide, revealing three snaggleteeth and a vast shadow.

“For the love of Heaven, what do you want?” he demanded. “You sneer at a duchy! What would you be? Pope of Rome?”

The irony brought from René no sign of resentment.

“That mightn’t be so bad,” he admitted after a moment of silence. “The Popes of recent years haven’t had a very good time of it, but just between you and me a hard-fisted Pope with enough brains to play one of these would-be emperors against the other could have things about his own way.

“However, I don’t think I’ll be Pope. Think of the grief of being responsible for a Christendom that embraces armorers and lute makers and other scamps—not to mention mountebanks and Antoine de Vaude-mont.”

Now it was obviously impossible that an adept such as Boson the Marvelous should fail to read at a glance the deepest secrets of the human heart. Mankind was to him an illuminated palimpsest, for he had been born with a caul and he had studied soothsaying in Persia, Arabia, and other heathen places, sharpening his second sight to an unbelievable degree of efficiency. There were many, and that included himself, who said that he had been an old man when the Burgundians rode into Gaul nearly nine centuries before, and he had wasted none of his time. But one who did not know of his attainments might have been deceived by the expression that crossed his face as he watched the fire-

light glinting in René's eager eyes. A stranger would have suspected—erroneously of course—that the great Boson was puzzled.

"The stars tell me you have lofty ambitions," he announced at length.

"Why not?" inquired René. "The stars are old-fashioned if they fail to see that this is an age of opportunity. The Duke of Burgundy wants to be an emperor. The King of England wants to be King of France. The Count of Vaudemont wants to be Duke of Lorraine. My gentle mother thinks she should be Queen of Aragon. And the King of France wishes to be King of France, which is the strangest wish of the lot. The whole world is a mess, magical sir, and as my dear uncle, the cardinal, has pointed out to me, when every man is a fighting man, a fellow of ordinary intelligence might make a name for himself by being something else."

The magician looked impressive as he boomed a reply that was more a matter of conversation than prophecy.

"The stars have marked you for war. No man, save of course myself, can see the future. Therefore he cannot recognize his opportunities until they have ceased to be. He goes where Fate leads him unless he takes the trouble to purchase a suitable amulet such as those I have brought back from Syria."

"Well, I am willing to admit that there probably is going to be more war. There will always be women in the world, and marriages, and married men will always be looking for an excuse to get away from home and rough it a bit with the benighted neighbors. There'll be more wars, all right, and I'll be in several of them, and I don't suppose I'll be any worse off than the other unfortunates who have to wear jerry-built tin plate.

But even without the aid of your Syrian amulets I think I can forecast that my future is going to be well reinforced with publicity. Whether I turn out to be the best general in the neighborhood of the Côte d'Or, or just the second best, I intend to have folks talk about me. I am going to be the best lute player in the armed forces of Europe, and as for the other arts I hope to hold my own against the trifling competition that this age of opportunity can offer. I'll venture to say that right now I can write a better sestina than the Emperor of Germany and that I paint a much better picture than Charles VII of France—my sister's husband, you may have heard of him. If only you and your numerous relatives would let me alone, I think I should do very well."

He had finished tuning his lute. He fondled it now, as the great Boson gasped, and presently the Hall of the Stag was tinkling with the bell-like melodies of a chanson:

*"I shall love you Alix, my pretty lass,
Until Time has broken his hour glass:
Until Gabriel marks Eternity
With the trump of doom by the dismal sea:
Alix my love.*

*"To you, Alix, I shall pledge my truth,
Queen of Beauty and Queen of Youth,
But I'd love you more, though you're wond'rous fair,
Were it not for Yolande's shining hair
Or the dainty charm and the coy caprice
And the mocking eyes of gay Narcisse,
Diane's sweet smile and the twinkling feet
And the fairy grace of Marguerite,
Alix my love.*

"What do you think of that?" asked René. "I wrote it myself."

"I think," replied the magician, "that women will make you a lot of trouble. You have a way with you—for all your conceit—and in the stars is the sign that a great love will guide you to your Destiny."

René laughed so heartily that the high vaults fairly echoed.

"I am a man's man," he announced with perfect complacency. "I like to look at pretty girls for the same reason that I like to look at a pretty horse. But women are a bit of a care."

"I think you have misinterpreted my interest in the arts. I have no ambition to jingle a zither in a boudoir and listen to gossip about the scandals of Paris, and Hesdin and Naples and Dijon. Of course if a lady smiles at me I shall smile back. It takes so little to keep the sweet sillies happy. But 'art for art's sake' is my motto and if you can contrive to live another ten years in addition to the thousand that you have already lived with such commendable success, I think I shall be able to demonstrate that art for art's sake may also be art for policy's sake."

Boson mumbled an Arabian word that sounded a good bit like "Bosh."

"I have spoken to the dumb sphinx in far-off Egypt," he declared. "And I have read the sacred books of Ephesus and I have questined the black basalt gods that ruled in Babylon, but never have I encountered puzzles that might be compared with yours."

"A man preparing to win battles with dubious voice and a flat G-string! You skill yourself in boudoir graces in the hope of charming the war lords who hold your future. Bah! For the first time in my thousand years of experience I feel compelled to revise a horoscope. I think I should be surprised, my son, were I to live another year without hearing of your being well

carved by some knight who cannot carry a tune nor tell the difference between a lute and an alembic."

René shrugged and tuned the G-string.

"It may be you are quite right," he admitted with a yawn. "Some knight may kill me before the year is out. And he may be illiterate. The Good Lord knows there are plenty of that kind. His education, of course, will be a matter of no moment to me if he succeeds in sticking a lance through my gizzard.

"On the other hand it is a fair gamble that some of these swashbuckling numskulls soon will be apologizing to the Great St. Peter because they cannot write their own names on the Golden Book of Heaven—and all on account of René, who paints a very fair portrait and is generally rated proficient on the lute.

"Don't forget that my reverend uncle the Cardinal taught me swordsmanship along with my philosophy and heard most of my Latin lessons on battlefields. I could be a better soldier. I'll admit that. But I know the rudiments, and I think that barring the fever and plague I may hope for a long and interesting life."

The astrologer did not reply for a moment. He was trying to recall some parallel case in the sacred books of Ephesus. He shook his head.

"What do you hope to make of yourself?" he inquired in a tone as close to bewilderment as so calm and assured a voice should come.

"Well," said René, "I think I shall be a king."

There was a noise in the women's quarters above. Down the curved stair came the echoes of a girl's voice. . . . A child was complaining bitterly.

"This is the noisiest court I was ever in," observed Boson, putting away his amulet.

"You can be thankful that you have lived a thou-

sand years without having had to stay in it," replied René. "You are listening to Isabelle, my fair wife. Yesterday was her twelfth birthday. Somebody gave her a squint-eyed doll from Cathay and she broke it. . . . She has been crying ever since. . . . You said something about women in my life? God forbend!"

And once more he sang the chanson of Alix as he gazed into the fire.



OYEZ, seigneurs, but this court of Nancy was a strange court, a place of puzzles where each of two score knights and ladies carried a secret and smiled complacently in the belief that none of the other thirty-nine was much of a mystery. It was a place of plainting lutes and clanking mail, whispers of love, and jingling rowels, open chivalry and cloaked intrigue, ribald minstrelsy and saintly sacrifice. On the cobbles of the Place Carrière drilled a handful of guards of the Cardinal of Bar, accepting casually the change of fortune that had brought them peaceably into the shadow of the ducal palace where a few months before they had been storming the Porte de la Craffe. In the shadow of St. Evre lolled the soldiers of the duke's garrison who had been their foemen. Now René d'Anjou, heir to Barrois, was husband of the child Isabelle, daughter of the Duke of Lorraine, and the sacred principles that had necessitated bloody war seemed to have become all muddled.

The Duke Charles looked upon this situation with mixed emotions. He rather liked the boy René—there was much good in him despite his eternal lute

playing. The lad appreciated the militaristic crafts of Julius Cæsar and could talk about them in Latin; and he was openly sincere in his admiration of the Duke's swordsmanship. All in all, Isabelle might have made a worse match. And yet the fiery Charles sometimes regretted that he had undertaken the youth's education. René had brought peace but he had spoiled a war—a very good war as wars go, and Charles had no option but to sit in Nancy and amuse himself as best he could under trying circumstances.

The minstrels were his special property, together with the ladies to whom they sang and the befuddled gallants who applauded. He assumed full responsibility, also, for the jongleurs and mountebanks and soothsayers and what not that crowded the normally commodious palace. And occasionally the Duchess Margaret, for all her piety, felt a bit put out with him.

"Since the day I married you and came to Nancy I have been a good wife," she informed him after one particularly prolonged and successful party. "I have tried to keep a respectable house and I don't appreciate such goings on as those that kept me awake last night."

Charles always felt remorseful on such occasions. There was a saintly beauty about Margaret and a queenly grace, despite her robes of sackcloth. She had in the serenity of a clear conscience a charm which she did not have to share with many of her retinue. The Duke had never been able to make her out and her quiet criticism always left him uncomfortable.

"You are an angel, Margaret," he admitted. "And I appreciate your advice. But I just don't seem to reform."

"Indeed you don't," agreed his wife. "You have been a bit trying, Charles. I have always done my

best for you, and somehow you haven't understood. You aren't bad at heart—just thoughtless and set in your ways. If you had been a little more adaptable I believe our married life might have been happier."

"Yes, my love," conceded the Duke.

"You must admit that I did my utmost to keep you at home in pleasant surroundings with good books and good example and quiet, congenial companionship. I hoped, you see, to bring you to some sort of a community of interest."

The duke looked a bit shamefaced.

"But I was interested in horses and jousts before I met you, my dear," he explained. "And to be perfectly frank with you, I have enjoyed the company of clever fakirs and warriors and such. The periods of quiet meditation that you prescribed for me would no doubt have made a much better man of me. But wars and the like were continually cutting in on my time, and so we have grown old, you and I, without arriving at that community of interest."

Margaret stroked his graying hair with motherly tenderness and smiled at him in sweet forgiveness.

"I shouldn't criticize you, my dear," she said. "But it has always been a puzzle to me how you could waste your time on horses and those shocking friends of yours. Horses are dreadful creatures and jongleurs are not much better. I am certain that had I been in your place I should never have allowed them to lure me from more important things."

"I am certain of it, my love."

"And especially the magicians, Charles. I certainly should have drawn the line at the magicians."

"If you are referring to the magical Boson, my dear Margaret, I assure you he isn't a bad chap. . . . Amusing. . . . Very. . . ."

"All of them are amusing in their own crude way, I suppose. But magicians and soothsayers are out-and-out bad companions. I suppose it is uncharitable of me to say it, but, Charles, they are fearful liars, and no two of them ever forecast the same thing. You might spend your money to better advantage by endowing a mission to Cathay or some such heathen place."

Charles sighed.

"You are right, my angel," he said conciliatingly. "But of course I am not so interested in the heathens in Cathay as I am in Boson. He's a silly old chap, but as I said, amusing. And so long as I feed him well his forecasts are quite soothing. They have a salutary effect on the simple soldiery—keep up the morale, so to speak."

Margaret smiled patiently.

"Still thinking of wars," she observed. "Do you know I sometimes think that wars were invented to give men an excuse for getting away from home and running over the country with riff-raff of all sorts."

"Heaven forbid!" protested the Duke, wondering at his wife's perspicacity. "Wars are very messy affairs in which one gets all wet and muddy and uncomfortable. I can assure you from some small experience that a cheerful fireside here is much to be preferred to a bivouac in the ooze, no matter how glorious the cause."

"That is undoubtedly true, and yet men are eternally quitting their homes at the first call of a trumpet. I suppose one could understand it if one could understand men. . . . But you are keeping me away from my duties. Run away now and come to see me tomorrow afternoon. . . . And pay off this Boson, my love. I can't approve of him."

So the Duke Charles kissed her chastely and departed. He found Boson dull and uninteresting that evening and discharged him. . . . And he passed the rest of the evening thinking up new stories of the horrors of war that he might put into circulation in quarters close to his wife.

.
*"To you, Alix, I shall pledge my truth,
Queen of Beauty and Queen of youth. . . ."*

René brought his song to a sudden end as he rapped on the door of the Duchess Margaret's chamber. The voice of Diane, lady in waiting to the Duchess, inquired his name and business.

"It is René," he replied. "I wish to pay my respects to my wife. . . ." A lengthy silence and then the expected answer:

"You must wait a moment, sir. My lady Isabelle is not yet fully dressed."

René wondered why little Isabelle must always be in the process of getting dressed. They had been married now a full two months and a variation in the time of his dutiful visits had failed to produce any change in the formula of his reception.

"I shall await my lady's convenience," he announced, and he seated himself in a window embrasure to resume his song. Matrimony being a dull business he had best not be too serious about it. He was admitted presently to the chamber where Isabelle sat at the feet of the Duchess Margaret.

"Good morning my beloved husband," greeted the child mechanically. "May God give you every blessing. . . . And have you brought anything for me?"

The youth René, looking scarcely older than his

twelve-year-old wife, smiled with the superior wisdom of age.

"I have brought you another doll," he said as he extracted the present from his blouse. "It is quite valuable because it is carved out of a solid block of wood. You cannot break it."

"I don't think I care for such a doll," replied Isabelle as she looked at the gift with an appraising eye. "The frail ones are much better."

"Isabelle," called her mother sharply. "Take René's beautiful gift and thank him for it like a little lady."

Isabelle complied with a grace that was largely artificial.

"I thank you, sir, for your beautiful gift," she assured him. "The doll has lovely eyes and will last me a long time. You may kiss me now."

"I am very glad that you find my little token acceptable," said René with a sweeping bow as he moved to take the proffered kiss.

"Only her hand, René," counseled the Duchess. "Must I be forever telling you children to behave circumspectly. Matrimony does not exempt you from the rules of propriety while I am chaperoning you."

"I thought that she deserved some compensation for the doll," explained René. "And after all mother, a married lady should have some privileges. . . ." The stern eye of the Duchess Margaret had a more subtle effect upon him than the sonorous pronouncements of Boson. He abandoned the argument and kissed Isabelle's hand with all the formal courtesy established as proper by the smart people of the period. Isabelle took her hand away from him and shook it.

"I don't like being married," she protested. "I used to have lots of little boys to play with before René came. And now there's nobody but René and I only

see him ten minutes a day. And I have to put on a velvet frock that reaches to my heels. And I don't like him anyway. And I don't like his old unbreakable dolls. And I'll say it if you spank me for it. . . . So there."

"Isabelle," cried the Duchess, aghast. "Isabelle! Such language! You are speaking of your husband, joined to you by all the rites of holy wedlock. Didn't you promise to love and cherish him? And till death do you part? Didn't you?"

"Husbands are a nuisance," was the defiant reply. "I didn't ask for him. I wanted to marry somebody with a gray beard and a knee I could sit on. I thought if I tried hard enough I could marry a king. And I got René."

"Isabelle!"

René was listening to the tirade in bored silence. He had never been intimately acquainted with a little girl of this age before, and he could not quite fathom her. Diane, the dark-haired lady in waiting, was making unsuccessful efforts to conceal her smiles. The Duchess Margaret had known Isabelle too long to be scandalized by an outburst of temper, but she simulated such a reaction with a perfection of detail that deceived René.

"Isabelle," she stated coldly, "as soon as your husband goes you shall be spanked. And then you shall spend the afternoon in penitential meditation until you realize that temper is unbecoming a lady, and that a wife must always subordinate her own wishes to those of her spouse."

Tears of anger had brought luster to little Isabelle's wide brown eyes.

"I don't like him," she repeated hotly.

"Isabelle!"

"I don't! And spanking me won't make me like him any better."

René seemed a bit uncomfortable. But he had been through such scenes before. It was patent that he recognized the futility of offering a defense.

"I am going to the war again to-morrow," he said by way of changing the subject. "The Duke and I are going out into the hills toward Metz to exterminate a few bandits. We ought to have a jolly time."

"What!" exclaimed the Duchess.

René flushed, conscious of error, and his reply was in the tone of one who has just recalled his lines.

"That is to say, it will be a nasty job," he said. "I don't think it will be too dangerous, but it will take the better part of this month and the weather is none too fair this early in the season. Guy of Arnfeldt is well entrenched and the Duke says we may be forced to camp in the mud for several days."

"I see," observed the Duchess Margaret with disconcerting sweetness. René hung his head as she smiled at him. "Another war. . . . And you are going soldiering again. It is the good God's kindness that Yolande of Aragon cannot know what sort of education her son is getting at the hands of the Christian Duke of Lorraine."

"The Duke is very good to me, my lady," maintained René with a quick uplifting of his chin. "He has equipped me to the best of his ability and is trying to fit me for the work I shall have to do when an unfortunate day takes away his guidance and makes me Duke of Lorraine. He isn't a very good judge of armor. But he is an excellent swordsman, and . . ."

"That is the way with men. They will always be uncouth, unreliable creatures because mothers are never allowed to bring up their own sons. That right passes

to the male branch by some sort of Salic law that will have to be repealed before civilization can ever amount to much. It seems like yesterday that you came here—a baby to be married to my baby. And now you talk as much like Charles as if you were his second self. . . . Just one step from the cradle and longing to stay out nights.”

“It isn’t that, my lady . . .”

“Don’t try to explain, René, dear. I have been married to Charles of Lorraine for sixteen years, and I know the symptoms. I should like to have the training of you. I can promise you there would be less sword play and more moral philosophy. You’d be a better man for it. . . .”

“But, my lady, Antoine de Vaudemont knows how to ride a horse and swing a saber . . .” René paused, his face betraying honest puzzlement. “Philosophy wouldn’t be much of a protection against him. My lord the Duke says . . .”

“I know what he says, René. I have listened to him often enough and I can hear him all over again in your excuses. I’d keep you right here with me, my boy, if such a thing were possible. As it is, I can only wish you the best of God’s blessings and speak to the Duke. . . . Yes, I shall certainly speak to Charles. . . . as soon as I have spanked your wife.”

Duchess Margaret arose and led the weeping Isabelle toward the door of an inner chamber. René bowed ceremoniously and started, a bit shamefacedly, toward the outer hall. The pretty Diane followed him as far as the threshold, looked about once to make sure that the Duchess had disappeared, and then raised her pert little face in unmistakable invitation. For one so young René kissed her rather skillfully.

It seemed the gentlemanly thing to do.

Book One

Love

I

IN the Street of the Green Carpet the ancient houses bulked tipsily into a great gloom like an inverted stairway to chaos. Overhanging gables balanced perilously and dormer windows stared into one another's open eyes with an intimacy denied the doors three stories below. Between the cracked roofs that continually spilled tiles onto the cobbled pavement, the sky showed diffidently through a narrow strip of space grudgingly allowed by the generations of architects who had contributed to the irregular Gothic vault with which the buildings arched the street.

The rain, driven in from the Vosges by a high, cold wind, swept down through this little cleft like a waving wet curtain. Little geysers of mud leaped out of the worn roadway to meet the torrent. Light from the blistered panes in the lower windows made beadwork designs against the rain. An artillery of loose shutters crashed and shivered from one rampart of Nancy to the other. A cloaked figure drew back under the cascade of a particularly fluent gargoyle while a cursing guardsman passed by with a lantern and a bare sword. The wraith in the black cloak became a part of the unplumbed shadow along the wall and followed close at his heels to the Place des Ducs and the moist refuge of another gargoyle.

From the direction of the Porte de la Craffe came

a turmoil quite apart from the din of the storm . . . the jangling of hardware and the beat of horses' hoofs and the shouts of many men.

"Nosey" Pierre, proprietor of the auberge that stood hard by the buttresses of Saint Evre, opened his door cautiously and peered out into the watery reaches of the Place des Ducs. "Margot of the Facile Tongue," his engaging wife, called to him sharply for leaving the door open, then clattered after him to the threshold, a thin voice in wooden shoes.

"What's the matter," she demanded.

"Just off hand I'd say the troops were back," replied Pierre. Margot sniffed.

"Just off hand I'd say they hadn't had much luck," she observed. "No cheering means no loot, and no loot means that we'll be carrying a score of these louts on the books until the gracious Duke drags them out on another wild goose chase."

"Hush!"

"Don't try to hush me. It's the truth. We're the people who have to put up the coin for these parades. You and I have to support the Duke's good-for-nothing heroes between expeditions. . . . That is I do, for God knows you don't do enough around here to earn your salt. You . . ."

There were some sharp cries and muffled orders in the Street of the Green Carpet, and then the sound of footmen running.

"Some sort of row," commented Pierre. "You don't suppose that Arnfeld licked 'em?"

"Arnfeld! Bah! What chance would a thick-headed nincompoop like that have against our boys? One Nancois could beat a dozen like him." And then Margot excused herself while she went to bury her valuables in the cellar. The center of the disturbance

seemed to be moving closer and closer toward the Place des Ducs. Presently a dripping soldier detached himself from the gloom and slipped into the tavern.

"What's the matter?" inquired old Pierre. The soldier squeezed a quantity of water out of his leather jacket and laid a harquebus on the nearest table.

"For the love of Michel give me a drink," he pleaded. "And make it a tall one."

Old Pierre recognized Rauol Martel, a nonpaying guest of some two years' standing, but he showed no hesitation in filling the order. Obviously this was no time for argument. The man was wet and cold, and peevish. He set a tankard of *vin rosée* beside the harquebus, closed the door, and stood expectant. After one draught Raoul became important and communicative.

"There's the devil to pay," he declared in a voice two tones lower than his customary bass. Margot stuck her head up through the cellar trap to look at him.

"The devil to pay," she repeated. "Well, if he's waiting for you to cancel the debt he'll soon be mortgaging hell," she declared with an excusable certainty.

"That'll be enough out of you," advised the harquebusier. "I'm only a poor soldier but I'm honest. Just as soon as I get my hands on a few livres I'll pay you to the last denier, you harridan. . . . And then, so help me Michel, I'll take my trade to the Coq d'Or."

"Heaven help the Coq d'Or and may it have a painless bankruptcy," replied Margot as she disappeared to complete the task that had taken her to the cellar. Her disappearance brought Raoul back to a sense of his dignity.

"We followed Arnfeld," he recited. "For three days and nights we followed him. We broke up his band and killed some say a thousand, although per-

sonally I can vouch for only about a dozen. But we lost track of him near Toul and came back."

"But the row," insisted Pierre. "What was the meaning of that?—the running and what not? It's too much for a weak heart . . ."

"Somebody slipped in through the *Porte de la Craffe*."

"A spy!" Pierre's excitement gave a hysterical lift to his voice. "We'll be murdered in our beds by *Vaudemont*."

"This doesn't seem to be that kind of a spy. Forged pass. Looked all right. Might never have been noticed only just as it was turned in we came up to the gate. The guard showed it to the Duke and he said he never saw it before. So now instead of getting to a fire and a mug of wine we're all turned out to search Nancy for a woman."

"A woman! All this row about a woman?"

"Why not?" Raoul looked significantly at the open trap whence at intervals came complimentary observations from Margot of the *Facile Tongue*. "Why not? Aren't women the cause of all the trouble in the world?"

"Most of it," agreed Nosey Pierre. His voice had sunk to a whisper.

Soldiery afoot and on horseback streamed through the ruelles of Nancy, none too pleased with its task. A slim figure in black armor dropped from an iron-plated mount near the portico of Saint Evre and passed the bridle to a footman who strode away through the rain toward the ducal palace. The chevalier, a dark shadow inseparable from the night, skirted the *Place des Ducs* toward the corner that gave into the Street of the Green Carpet. . . . It might have been only a trick of tired eyes, but he thought that he had seen

something moving under the spout of a gargoyle on the Hotel de Sampigny.

The chevalier was swift, despite the weight of his arms, and the musical jingle accompanying his progress was lost in the medley of louder noises. He reached the Gothic portal of the Hotel de Sampigny without detection either by the amorphous thing he stalked or the troopers who plodded half-heartedly across the square. He stopped suddenly as the door opened and a new ghost, no more tangible than the others that filled the night, slipped out of a dark archway. The chevalier was almost within touching distance when the phantom stopped beneath the gargoyle. Then two shadows moved along the southern edge of the square and behind them slipped a third.

Climax came swiftly in this pantomime. At the main portal of the ducal palace, a sentry paraded unseen save for his wet helmet which glistened like a flame as he passed to and fro through a beam of light that struck downward from the guardroom window. Suddenly there was a second flame in the light—the down stroke of a poignard. There followed the crash of metal as an armored body fell forward upon the flags. The chevalier leaped out of the shadow. For an instant his face was revealed in the light. A startled voice called his name: “René!”

Then two swords crossed in the dark.

A woman gave a little cry. A door opened and closed. The shouts of the soldiery became fainter as they turned, in their search, across the Place de la Carrière. Steel scraped steel with businesslike energy, a musical if tragic obbligato to the moaning wind and plashing rain.



RENÉ, bent forward in his high-backed chair, was warming his shins by the sputtering fire when the Duke Charles entered the Hall of the Stag. His leg gear was scattered on the floor about him and steam was rising from his damp hose. The duke surrendered his rain-beaded armor to a brace of lackeys and dropped to a stool at the end of the long table where another servitor was waiting to put a mug of hot spiced wine under his appreciative nose.

"You seem to have tired a bit early," said Charles to René. "When I was your age nothing would have prevented me from staying in the hunt to the death."

"Was there a death?" René's query was maliciously polite.

"No," boomed the Duke. "There wasn't. Where any woman could have hidden herself in this town is more than I can figure, unless of course, somebody took her in. I've been through alleys to-night that I never knew existed."

"Did you come in through the grande porte?"

"No—through the postern—what of it?"

"I was just wondering how I came to miss you. . . . You see, your grace, I didn't quit the hunt as early as you believed. In fact I'm still at it—by proxy, perhaps, but still active."

"I sometimes wish that we could do all this campaigning by proxy."

"We might study the book of our enemies. They seem to fight that way."

The duke shivered as a gust of wind in the chimney stirred the sparks with noisy display.

"Only a thoroughgoing reprobate would take a man out on a night like this," he declared.

"Only a pair of fools would go," remarked René as he picked up his lute from the table. "I don't mind particularly trailing mysterious ladies in black cloaks who are ingenious enough to fool the sentries. But chasing free companions through swamp and brush is an affair that cuts in on one's afternoons. Until somebody invents waterproof armor I prefer to do my fighting in dry weather."

"They won't play the game according to the rules," complained the Duke from the depths of his silver tankard. "Bandits are an infernal nuisance."

"Bandits," repeated René. "The name is a euphemism. You are too generous—as always—with Nicholas and the men he works for. The honor of a man who hires a cutthroat to break all the laws of murder is debatable."

"Nicholas is just another Arnfeld—like his father and the rest of his pig ancestry—not worth the argument. . . . And, damn it, I'm going to have the rheumatism in my joints to-morrow!"

"Nicholas is just another Arnfeld. But don't take it for granted that we have been wading the mud to-night to round up just another Arnfeld. Since I came to your house, and that's very nearly nine years ago, I have suspected that Arnfeld might be the other self of the Count of Vaudemont . . . and De Vaudemont, poor yokel, is a rather dubious lance of the Duke of Burgundy."

"Possibly, but your worthy cousin Philippe of Burgundy has some of the earmarks of a gentleman. Jean, his father, wasn't overnice in his methods, but we have been fighting the son for quite a few years now—through one substitute or another—and he has never

been proved guilty of Antoine de Vaudemont."

René was humming a little chanson about a lady who had worn a red rose, and with the lute tucked under his arm against his leather jacket, he looked more like a troubadour than the wily director of a score of battles.

"The difference between Jean Sans Peur and Philippe le Bon is purely a matter of tools," he argued. "The father was man enough to do his own murderings. The son drops a hint to Antoine de Vaudemont and De Vaudemont passes the word to an Arnfeld.

"Of course in its effect on the victim one process is quite as good as another. But even I who have had no experience in such things can see that there might be some satisfaction in having one's throat cut by a Valois Duke of Burgundy and none at all in being stabbed in the back by an Alsatian pig."

"You are a mite too suspicious, my boy. The Duke of Burgundy was the first to congratulate you on your marriage to Isabelle. You may not remember that, but he was. And Antoine de Vaudemont filed only one protest against the nuptials before he got thrown out of court. You know he hasn't been popular enough to cause any trouble in these parts since."

"I don't trust folks who send me congratulations. Congratulations—condolences—usually synonyms! I am naturally of a sweet, confiding, ingenuous disposition, but I am free to confess that as soon as I had laid away the congratulations of the Duke of Burgundy I had a blacksmith put some reinforcements in the back of my iron shirt. Fortune deals so unkindly with Philippe's friends."

"Bah!" commented the Duke Charles with a bluff heartiness that betokened hope rather than conviction. "Youth is always wary. . . . Always looking for fu-

ture trouble. Age takes things as they come. And that is natural because in youth the future is long and wide and in age it is short as a crypt and narrow as a woman's mind—and as empty."

René played two trills and a mordent that sounded like a girl's laughter, and he smiled as he answered:

"You must have been listening to the Lady Margaret again. She was always an advocate of philosophy and epigram as a substitute for steel. But if you will pardon me saying it, my Duke, it will take more than snappy lines to improve the reputation of the Duke of Burgundy and nothing short of a meat ax to improve his disposition . . ." He played a minor chord and tuned the G-string. "I hear that he has just completed a deal with the English whereby King Charles is to be allowed to keep what he has—which at present speaking is a town lot in Bourges and a farm in Dauphine—the English are to be allowed to keep what they have—which is most of France—and Burgundy is to hammer out an empire, the boundaries of which Philippe has not quite charted."

"Where did you hear that?" The concern in the Duke's voice was obviously sincere.

"I overheard a conversation as I was coming in. Two persons were discussing the matter out there under a gargoyle—a silly place for a rendezvous. One of them I didn't recognize. The other was the Marquis de Sampigny, whom I have always suspected of being a spy . . ."

The Duke rose from his stool suddenly and reached for his sword.

"Sampigny," he roared. "We'll hear from Sampigny. . . . Send for Sampigny . . ."

René interrupted him with a quiet gesture.

"Don't be too hasty," he advised. "There's nobody

around here we could send. Sampigny has been in hell for thirty minutes, so a proper messenger would be Arnfeld or Vaudemont or the Duke of Burgundy."

"What?" The Duke was gaping. He clasped the table with both hands and started to lower himself back into his seat.

"If you intend to look for what's left of Sampigny," went on René in a casual tone, "I can direct you. His corpse is out in the ditch beside the sentry box to the left of the front door as you exit. I killed him just before I came in."

"You killed—you . . ."

"Nothing surprising about it. He was quite a bit overrated. His offensive was good but he tried the Italian style of defense and I caught him with a short point in the chin. . . . A poetic death for a cut-throat."

"But—but—why?"

Death was nothing new to the Duke. Even the slaying of the most skilled swordsman in Lorraine on the doorstep of the ducal palace was a turn of events not without precedent. But such things did not happen without cause, and there was puzzlement slowly following incredulity in his eyes as he stared at René.

"I had evidence enough that he was making a trade with De Vaudemont or Burgundy—one and the same thing—and I didn't have an opportunity to argue," the youth explained. "Too bad . . . He was a good soldier . . . but not entirely trustworthy. And now I suppose we can begin to pray for stout bucklers and dry saddles . . ."

As he spoke the lute sang the protest of an artist compelled to ride in steel plate over hostile roads, the complaint of a gentle youth who wished only to be

left alone. The Duke gazed upon René as upon a changeling.

"If you have killed Jean de Sampigny there will be a fine row," he observed with judicial calm. But he got no chance to explain. A guardsman stepped into the room with the scant ceremony that prevailed in Charles' court. He dropped a pike in rough salute and lifted his visor to reveal a frightened face.

"Another sentry stabbed, Seigneur," he reported.

"Dead?"

"Dead as ever I hope to be. Bumped off from behind. Guillaume, it was. One of the Swiss . . . and he was a good soldier, too, for a Swiss. Right out in front of the door he was. I come up with the relief and I called to him and there he is all mushed up in the corner there. Right away I see something is the matter and I says to him: 'Guillaume, what's the matter?' But he doesn't answer, see. He's dead, see. Dead. Somebody has stuck him under the left shoulder where his gear fits loose.

"Right out in front of the door he was, and he just got bumped off without a sound. There's maybe fifteen of us in the guardroom shootin' dice and not one of us hears a thing. And out there is poor Guillaume mushed up in the doorway all dead and it raining cats and dogs."

The Duke pushed aside his tankard and arose once more. René did not betray any signs of emotion. Save for the slight curling of his lips one might have guessed that he had not heard. He was picking from the strings a bell-like song with a minor afterbeat:

*"I love you madly, sweet Julie,
But may not drink, for safety,
The potions you prepare for me.
In courage, dear, I lack.*

*I bare my breast to any foe.
The fate before me I may know;
But I shall hang, before I go,
My breastplate on my back."*

Charles stood for a moment looking at the guardsman, then pounded on the table and crashed through René's song with a fierce bellow:

"For the love of God, what next?"

The guardsman blinked.

"Wisht I knew," he replied fervently.

The Duke strode to the wide doors and threw them open.

"Turn out the guard!" he roared. "Turn out the guard!"

René made no move to leave his seat by the fire.

"I shall have to ask you to excuse me from this expedition," he said. "I feel a bit fatigued after the night's work, and besides I have some important business hereabouts."

The Duke, white with anger at an unseen peril, paid no attention to him. He had picked up his sword and stepped out into the corridor now in a turmoil with raging men and panic-stricken women. Wild echoes stirred the palace to its ancient roof:

"Turn out the guard!"



THE great hall presently was silent save for the echoes that filtered through the thick walls from the street. The fire crackled to the whimsical accompaniment of René's lute and the distant ceiling was vibrant with a play of light and shadow across

the vaulting. A flambeau was alight in one corner of the room. René walked over and extinguished it. Then he turned abruptly toward an Italian armoire that stood near the door.

"You might as well come out," he said. "The Duke will be occupied about half an hour and he will be quite a bit wetter when he comes back. There is no telling what sort of temper he may be in."

As if through some magic in his quiet tone, the door of the armoire swung open and a woman wrapped in a wet black cloak stepped out into the firelight. An atmosphere of abstract stateliness and perfect poise enveloped her. And she might have been at home in her own boudoir for all the effect that the strangeness of the situation produced in her manner. She unhooked a golden clasp at her neck and with one graceful gesture freed herself of hood and cape. She laid the dripping garment over a chair and walked with a hauteur bordering on insolence toward the fire.

"It is something of a comfort to be out of the cupboard," she admitted casually as she stretched her open palms toward the blaze. René who had followed her without further comment bowed and offered a chair. She seated herself with careful dignity.

"I should like you to be as comfortable as possible," said René. "There is a pot of mulled wine on the hearth—or shall I get you some spirits."

"The wine will do well enough, thank you, sir," she assured him. "I don't suppose I should be drinking that, but candidly I am a bit cold. These Flemish cloaks shed most of the water but not all . . ."

She took the silver goblet from him with a quick smile and a provocative arching of the brows. René noticed that she was strikingly pretty for all that a

moist curl straggled from beneath her little silver cap and over her forehead, and that streaks of water spoiled the sheen of her dark red velvet gown.

"So Sampigny is dead," she remarked without emotion.

"I must admit that he is, my lady," said René. "One doesn't wound a Sampigny . . . one kills or gets killed."

"I was so frightened," she told him with a pretty little shudder. "I was just about to lift the knocker when all this terrible affair occurred. . . . I had never seen death before and there it was right at my feet. . . . How frightened my poor dear mother would be if she could know what I have just been through."

"Of course, of course," agreed René, trilling the lute. "But if Mamma could have seen you trailing around Nancy with Sampigny she might have foreseen that you were going to get into a mess.

The girl turned on him indignantly.

"Do you mean to say . . ." she demanded. The young Duke of Bar smiled and raised his hand.

"You are beautifully convincing," he observed cheerily. "But you'll make me think less of you if you underrate my intelligence. We have a little secret, you and I, and there is no use going around the facts. Let us take it for granted that I saw you meet Sampigny under the gargoyle and that I overheard such portions of your conversation as I related to my Lord the Duke. Starting from that point we may get somewhere."

The lady settled back in her chair, pouted and sipped her wine.

"You might at least give me the benefit of the doubt," she argued. "I had to make De Sampigny an excuse or I should never have got here. My inten-

tions in coming to Nancy were the very best. . .”

“And now two men are dead . . . the sentry who might have questioned your right to enter here unannounced, and the excuse who felt himself called upon—probably for the best of reasons—to kill the sentry.”

“You don’t understand!” The girl’s voice had taken on a passionate intensity. “I came here as a friend—your friend.” She leaned forward and René saw only two tearful pleading eyes as free from guile as those of the Duchess Margaret herself. “You will believe me, won’t you?”

“You are marvelously beautiful,” said René. “I’d believe you if you were to tell me that Antoine de Vaudemont is a saint of God.”

She laughed a choking little laugh and brushed away the tears, or maybe raindrops, that glistened on her long lashes.

“That’s better,” she said. “You are as gentle and kind as I knew you would be. And you are the most wonderful swordsman I have ever seen.”

“Thank you, my lady. But you are giving me too much credit. The element of luck had a great deal to do with Sampigny’s sad finish. He probably felt a little too sure of himself. Overconfidence is the ruination of many a good soldier, particularly when he uses an ornate defense and fights in the mud.”

“No amount of caution could have protected him. You were all about him like the night. You have the Italian finesse in attack coupled with Burgundian force. . . . Oh, I know swordsmanship when I see it, my Duke, and I said a little prayer for Sampigny when I saw your swords cross.”

René looked at her oddly. The lady’s information was not entirely correct, but she seemed to be en-

thusiastic and enthusiasm is two-thirds of the equipment of a successful critic. She seemed at least to be willing to talk about the technique of dueling, a topic of conversation in which the Duchess Margaret and Isabelle of Lorraine and the other ladies of the ducal house were strikingly deficient.

"It's not the Italian school," he corrected her. "It's Spanish. If you could have seen the wrist movement you might have noticed; and the forceful attack is English. My uncle the Cardinal taught me the rudiments and my lord the Duke finished the instruction."

"The school makes no difference, my Duke. I am only a girl, which is my misfortune, but I come of a family of soldiers—your wife's family, if you must know—and I know that a skilled brain driving a strong arm are the two requisites of successful swordsmanship. De Sampigny had the arm, but your brilliant opening bewildered him. . . . I shall always remember this night."

"So shall I, my lady."

There was a moment of silence while she studied him with widening eyes.

"Why, you are not wearing armor!" she ejaculated. "You fought De Sampigny without armor?"

"Oh, no, not at all. He was wearing his. I did not feel called upon to discard mine. Ordinary horse sense should govern in duels as in all else. But I took off most of the hardware when I followed you in here because I felt that armor is useless equipment in a rendezvous with so lovely a lady . . ."

"You say nice things with an expertness that does you credit. And armor is so cold and unyielding."

She sighed and sipped her wine. René took up the lute. The fire crackled cheerily.

"I suppose I ought to tell you my name," she admitted after a pause.

"It might help to start from a basis of mutual understanding," he said in a whimsical tone. "Nothing could be more disconcerting than to talk for an hour or so and then discover that we hadn't been talking to each other at all. My name, for instance, is René of Anjou. I am Marquis of Pont à Mousson and Duke of Bar. And I have traveled a lot and never beheld your like."

"Thank you," said the lady. "I am Yvette de Souigny. I am a first cousin to Isabelle of Lorraine—although perhaps she doesn't talk about that—and I live in Metz. I saw you there two years ago when you were chasing the elder Arnfeld."

"Two years ago. . . . That is strange." René played an appropriate chord on the lute. "I am quite certain that I never saw you before. I could never have forgotten."

The girl smiled at him mischievously.

"But you did see me," she countered with a moue. "Not only that but you kissed me. It was quite scandalous. It was in the dark corridor leading to the apartment of the countess . . . and we met . . . and . . . well, I have told you."

"Ah, but you admit it was dark," René pointed out. "And a kiss in the dark is almost invisible. That being the case there is only one test."

And very quickly he leaned over and kissed Yvette de Souigny full upon her flaming lips.

"If I ever kissed you before it was a hurried, superficial job," he observed critically. "There are some experiences that one does not forget."

"I am not certain," replied the girl with a tremulous

attempt at naïveté. "I am so stupid. . . . Would you mind repeating the test?"

"With the greatest of pleasure," replied René. And he complied. Then both were silent while some fifty grains of sand fell in the hour glass.

"Do you know why I came here?" asked the girl.

"Yes," said René without taking his eyes from the fire. "I think I do. You came here from Metz, dressed in Flemish fabrics and wearing the headdress of the Burgundian possessions in the Pays Bas, to deliver a message to the late De Sampigny from the Duke of Burgundy."

Yvette de Souigny swung about with fierce anger smoldering under her quivering lashes.

"You dare to doubt me?" she demanded. René played a minor chord.

"Yvette, my dear, you must pardon my abruptness. The fact is I don't doubt you at all. I know. I saw you speaking to Sampigny. I heard most of your message which obviously could not have been sent by anyone now in Metz. I saw you follow him. I saw you dart into this room while I was at the painful business of killing him. Your further business here I can only guess. . . . And there never was a girl like you in Metz . . ."

She shook her head petulantly and tears drove the anger from her eyes.

"I had hoped you would believe me," she said. "I had to deceive not only the guard at the gate but De Sampigny himself to get in here . . . I couldn't foresee that the poor sentry would be at the door. I came to give you a warning that you won't take. Can't you see that I am telling the truth?"

René appeared to be slightly disturbed.

"I find it difficult to play the diplomat," he said.

"And even more difficult to play the gallant. Primarily I am a soldier and have had very little to do with women in situations such as this. I keep forgetting my lines continually. On the other hand I am fairly well matured, an old campaigner, a bit of a politician and something of a psychologist."

Yvette smiled through her tears.

"You are delightful," she said. "You are probably not so old as I am, and you talk like a man of sixty. . . . You can't be more than twenty-one."

"That's no news in Lorraine," admitted René. "In years I am exactly twenty-one. In experience I am an old man. I have been married nine years to your cousin, Isabelle of Lorraine."

The girl moved her chair a bit closer.

"Please talk to me," she urged. "I suppose it is true that you have never seen my face before. But I have dreamed of you, my knight. Every young girl envisions the handsome prince who can be gentle with women and fearless with men. But there aren't many of them these days. In my grandmother's day men were gentlemen and romance was a wonderful, living thing. And until to-night I thought that the old days were gone forever—that I never should know a chevalier worthy of my love. . . . I heard the plotting against Lorraine at Metz . . . I heard men talking of war that will blacken the Meuse with ashes. . . . And I came here—you must believe me—simply because of a kiss in the dark at Metz. Your denials don't deceive me, René. I have remembered what you have forgotten. In all but that kiss you were a shadow to me, and still I remembered . . ."

It had grown very quiet in the Hall of the Stag save for the whispering of women in the upper corridors and the jingle of mail in the streets, sounds that

came from the distance like echoes one hears in one's sleep.

"No," said René reminiscently. "I have forgotten nothing that happened in Metz . . . I am certain that I never met you there . . . But I have known you my dear. I have whispered quatrains in your ear in Black Angers. I have made songs to you in Paris. I have marveled at your beauty in Arles. I have gathered poppies with you at Clermont en Argonne. I have listened for your voice in the long empty corridors at Saumur. I have seen the light dancing in your eyes at Nancy—Ho hum! I suppose I shall always be sentimental."

"I don't remember," said the lady. And she looked at him a bit surprisedly.

"Oh, quite likely you don't," admitted René.

"You are several persons in one, you see? Or rather you are one of several manifestations of the same person. You are an old, old acquaintance of mine, my dear. 'Yvette,' of course, is not your name nor that of the person you are supposed to be. . . ."

"Sir!"

"Don't interrupt me, my dear. We must have no secrets, you and I. . . . Yvette is quite another person, whatever your actual name may be. You are Milady of the Firelight, Milady Caprice, the alluring, the unattainable. Oh, yes, indeed, I know you quite well. Every poet knows you, but I better than the rest."

"I don't understand . . ."

"No woman could, of course. Because a woman is one facet of the diamond womankind—that's a good line. When you are as old as I am, my dear, you will realize that no man actually loves the woman to whom

he makes love. He loves the subjective ideal that he thinks she resembles."

"You are not complimentary. And if I am not as old as you I have much more sense. You have said that you are twenty-one."

"I am an old man," said René. "And I know more about women than I can ever tell you. I have been married. . . ."

The girl, still unable to discover the purpose of this odd conversation, looked up pertly.

"And Isabelle doesn't understand you, I suppose," she scoffed.

René considered the statement seriously.

"I think she does," he said at length. "I am very sure she understands me. I am not so complicated as all that. But you see the fact is that she hasn't the time to worry about me. I go trailing around meeting very interesting people hither and yon—always pursuing my Lady of the Firelight, who in the present instance, as I have mentioned, is your beautiful self. Isabelle has been a good wife to me and really is a wonderfully clever woman. She is pretty, gracious and accomplished, and takes a surprising interest in everything I do. And I have laughed for hours at the witty things she says . . ."

The dark eyes widened and the warmth of the firelight glowed in the scarlet of her half-parted lips.

"I think I follow you," whispered Yvette. "Whenever I hear a man talk of the wonderful things his wife does and says, I know that he is trying to convince not me but himself. Successful marriages need no such advertising. You have been unhappy?"

"Oh, yes, there's no secret in that. Everybody in Lorraine knows that I have never been allowed to do the things I have wanted to do. Milady of the Fire-

light whom I pursue so variously and energetically may be True Love and then again she may be merely the custodian of Lost Youth . . . Sometimes she waves at me from shuttered windows . . . Sometimes, from a balcony she drops her handkerchief or a rose—sometimes she smiles at me. . . . But, Ho hum! I am twenty-one and growing old.”

With an impulsive movement she suddenly clasped one of his hands in both of hers and looked into his eyes.

“What makes you think this lady is unattainable?” she asked. “Have you ever spoken to her?”

“I think I said I am married,” sighed René.

“You are a Duke and may choose your own court,” argued the girl enigmatically. “And almost any lady might find it easy to love you.”

“I am the husband of a Princess of Lorraine,” he reminded her. “And I am a sort of son by adoption to the Duchess Margaret. One wife is my quota, and for better or for worse and all that sort of thing, I shall have to make the best of it. My wife and her mother are peculiar about such things, and My Lady of the Firelight isn’t a wanton.”

The girl moved over until her damp hair brushed René’s cheek. Her hands were trembling on his.

“Who has the right to make rules for love?” she demanded. And for a moment the Duke of Bar forgot his whimsy. She was beautiful, this Yvette, and if the light in her eyes did not betoken understanding and sympathy, it seemed at least to indicate a very fair equivalent. René was lonesome with the loneliness of a man who walks with memories. He would have sat by a fire and played a lute and he had just crossed swords with a fellow who wasn’t a bad sort as courtiers went—and he had killed him. He would

have painted pictures and instead he rode out to wars. He would have exchanged confidences with the girl wife whom he scarcely knew, but instead he listened to intermittent hours of gossip and good advice and went his way in silence, isolated from his kind, encased in a spiritual shell more impregnable than Burgundian mail. Yvette was beautiful and warm and sympathetic, and René felt his throat closing.

"I told you the truth when I said I came to warn you," she told him in a low voice. "There are rumors that a great general is to come out of Lorraine and lead King Charles of France against the English. Philippe of Burgundy is going to attack. He . . ."

"Let's not talk of such things," answered René. "Do you know that your eyes are like the magic lakes old Boson talked about. A wise man could read his future in them. . . ."

"I love you," declared Yvette in a burst of passion. "I shan't let you go. I shan't. . . ."

Her arms were about his neck. René's heart seemed to have stopped beating. The fire and the room and the sounds of metal in the street outside were impressions of a detached consciousness. And then something seared into his shoulder.

The girl gave a little cry of rage and fear and sprang to her feet. A bit of steel fell to the floor. She stood surveying a blood-stained hand that clutched the hilt of a broken poignard.

Realization came to René very slowly.

"You stabbed me," he repeated as if to himself. "I forgot to tell you that I had not removed my iron shirt . . ."

"Mail!" she blazed, surveying the wound where the broken blade had cut her hand. "Mail! And I thought you were a gentleman. . . ."

IV

RENÉ was standing alone in the Hall of the Stag when the Duke Charles returned. He was stripped to the waist and attempting to bind a scarf about a wound under his left shoulder blade. The Duke, who had been cursing violently, stopped short at the sight of him.

"So that's why you were staying away from the hunt!" he roared with bluff sympathy. "Why didn't you say something? How did you get it? Who did it? Why didn't you say something?"

"I got it through some of that cast iron chain mail—devil take the man who turns out armor as rotten as that! It isn't anything to get excited about. A woman gave it to me and I didn't have it when you went out."

"What?"

"I have just been interviewing the lady you were chasing. The result of the interview seems to be too obvious to require comment."

The Duke became apoplectic and probably would have been enraged had he not been astonished. He attempted to speak but merely sputtered. He controlled himself with an effort that brought out the veins like cords on his wrinkled forehead.

"I hope you strangled her," he declared sincerely. "To think that my house should be upset like this in my advanced age . . . Why it's been years since any woman lured me from a warm room out into the wet."

"I turned her loose," said René calmly. "I gave her a pass through the Porte de la Craffe and a guard to take her there and I suppose that by now she's on her way home or somewhere."

"You turned her loose!"

The Duke pounded on the table with his mailed fist so energetically that the turmoil of the soldiery without died to an expectant hush.

"You turned her loose—the wench that was trafficking with Sampigny. You're taking things with a mighty high hand around here my lad. What right had you to make a truce with my enemies? What right. . . ."

"She was my prisoner," said René. "I killed Sampigny to get her—don't forget that. And I couldn't really throttle her. It's the height of impoliteness. And she said such complimentary things about the way I played the lute."

The Duke dropped into a chair with a clank and swore at the varlet who had come to unbuckle his gear.

"When I was a young man," he bawled, "when I was a young man" And then he seemed to be looking past René and through the dark wall. . . .

"Well, I guess, after all, that when I was a young man I was a young man." His voice was a half whisper. He reached for the tankard he had left on the table.

"As a corpse she wouldn't have amounted to much," said René, taking another turn in the scarf. "But a misinformed spy may do some good . . . I let her hear me whisper to the captain of the guard that we should concentrate our complete force over on the edge of Burgundy to ward off this attack that isn't going to happen. I knew she had a message for Vaudemont and I rather thought it might be a good thing to have her deliver it. She's on her way now to Metz or Toul or Vezelise. . . ."

"Or Strasbourg or Besançon or Luxembourg," mocked the Duke. "Damn it, I wish I had been here to meet her."

"Don't be worried," advised René. "De Vaudemont's troops are on their way to join Philippe of Burgundy and the English. There's a big fight due at Orléans and our friends have advance information about it. I gathered all that from what the lady had to tell Sampigny. There won't be a soldier left in this neighborhood to-morrow except our own. The lady's mission was to have you misled and me eliminated but the failure of that detail won't change De Vaudemont's plans much. With your Grace's permission we shall start out in the morning and lay siege simultaneously and unexpectedly to Toul, Vezelise and Metz."

"Your tactics and your colossal nerve are well matched," declared the Duke. "When I was a young man . . ."

And then he stopped once more, for reminiscence was not overkind to his philosophy.

"Perhaps you are right," he conceded slowly. "Victory perches on the gonfalon of the damned fool. It isn't the tactician who wins battles—nor the old man. Take the troops. They're yours anyway. God of battles! To have my youth again. . . ."

"To-morrow I shall have the damned rheumatism. . . ."

"Light up the flambeaux, you boobies, and get me another pot of sack. . . ."

"The fire has gone out."

"So it has," said René.



ISABELLE of Lorraine was a flame of a woman, eternally changing, never at rest, difficult to approach, impossible to understand—but like her mother the Duchess Margaret, she was a cold flame. She sat now under a torch by the black draperies of her bed, a wraith in white, a luminous ghost save for the pink flesh of her exposed bosom, the alert movement of her eyes and the human aura that glowed in her hair. She was knitting, and her needles were nervous slivers of light under bars of wax. As René entered she looked up and smiled.

“So you are back again, my René,” she greeted him, half rising to meet his kiss.

“Yes, my dear,” he said shyly. “Back once more to my own vine and fig tree. You don’t know how good it seems to be home.”

“Did you miss me, René?”

“Of course I missed you. . . . It is so lonesome out there under the stars with no one to talk to except soldiers and no chance to keep clean or act like a human being. I don’t like wars and I don’t like mud . . .”

There was eminent truth in his trite, oft-repeated speech. A man would have noticed it at once. René had a nice taste for sleeping quarters with roofs over them and for such effeminate comforts as a dry board under his back. Practice had given him a certain expertness with arms and a reputation that extended far across France wherever the brothers of the sword were gathered. But there was always mud on the laurels of battle . . . And even in victory, hunger kept pace with the war horse.

Isabelle, however, was skeptical. She would not have been her mother's daughter otherwise.

"You do not say it convincingly, René," she told him. "You need more practice on your inflection. But of course I am glad to hear you say it at all."

René could not find a ready answer. To him Isabelle was still the enigma that she had been nine years before when, as a rebellious little child she had said unkind and unanswerable things to him.

"What's this I hear about your dueling again?" she pursued with just a shade of severity.

"Well, I had a bit of a row out there at the front door," he admitted. "But so far as I was concerned it didn't turn out seriously."

"I think you are a little too ready with that sword of yours. You hold life too cheaply. If you had kept your temper to-night a very charming gentleman would still be with us, God willing, and you wouldn't be before me with his blood on your hands."

"There is another way of looking at that," commented her husband quietly. "One charming gentleman might still be with us and another charming gentleman might be out there in the doorway with his clean hands folded across his breast. And I never had any talent for being a wet corpse."

"Nonsense! De Sampigny never showed your zeal for picking quarrels. I am really disturbed at the way you carry on, René. This affair to-night is little short of a public scandal. You out fighting and killing and all the rest of the Duke's household touring the streets looking for a woman . . . A woman! A pretty affair, very!"

"Now, Isabelle. . . ."

"Don't attempt to explain, René. I am not blind.

And I am not simple. I saw that cat Marie Du Plessis making eyes at you when you were playing the lute the evening before you went away. And I overheard Marguerite de Saigne asking Lady Diane if she didn't think you were the most interesting man in Nancy. Interesting! It's too bad she couldn't see you for a few days as I have seen you! It isn't that I'm jealous of you, René. I'm not concerned in what you do. I am only your wife. But I'd like you to know that I am not being deceived at all."

"But Isabelle. . . ."

He faltered at the look of superiority in her cold blue eyes. She smiled pityingly.

"You haven't been home for a month," she went on, "or I might have brought these matters to your attention earlier. For one who dislikes war so much I should say that you are making a martyr out of yourself with painstaking regularity. When you are home you are doing nothing but playing the lute—which I could burn with a clear conscience—and then you leave to be with that rabble day in, day out, carousing, looting, cursing and butchering. What do you expect to make of yourself?"

Silence.

"And as for the girls around this court, I can't for the life of me see what has come over them. I am sure I shouldn't risk my reputation the way they do. You aren't handsome, my René. You are a bit pompous and you carry yourself with a vain air. But not even a strut can change the twist of your nose. And you let these stupid little geese follow you around and tell you lies. It is sickening."

"But, my dear, admitting all that you say, we don't seem to be arriving anywhere in this conversation. You object to my going to war. You object to my playing

the lute. You object to my conduct at home. As far as fighting is concerned it seems to me that you should be relieved to see me out of the clutches of these designing females with whom you have surrounded yourself."

For a moment the glint went out of Isabelle's eyes and her quick fingers stopped their play with the flashing needles.

"There should be some half-way course," she protested. "You don't have to play the lute and sing love songs when these women are about. You don't have to talk to them. You could ignore them and would, if you had any pride. You could turn away their compliments with one sharp answer."

René raised and lowered his hands helplessly.

"Isabelle," he said, "with your eyes as good as they are and your hired ears as numerous as they are, you don't need to be told that I have had nothing to do with these girls except to the extent that you have witnessed. I think I like girls. They haven't much sense, but as I have learned through my association with yourself they are pleasant, engaging creatures.

"I feel thankful that they should talk to a grizzled veteran like myself. But that's as far as it goes. There certainly isn't any infidelity in a compliment or sin in a kiss. And the Lord knows even if I cared to philander I'd have a fine chance with your sweet mother at one elbow and your murderous father at the other."

"I'm not saying you haven't been a virtuous husband," interrupted Isabelle. "I am saying that you haven't been a good husband. There's a difference. You are thoughtless. You never give a bit of attention to anything but your own affairs. You are too headstrong to take advice. And besides I don't like

to have you playing the lute and talking to these women. . . ."

René kissed her with an abruptness that failed to conceal his diffidence.

"Are you glad to have me back with you?" he asked as one who repeats a formula.

"Of course I am," she replied. "But don't talk so loud. You'll wake the children. Jean has been fretful all day and Margaret has been almost unmanageable. Then my mother very nearly made me lose my temper. She came in to tell me how to take care of them. As if I didn't know enough to look out for my own babies."

"Preposterous," agreed René.

"I get so provoked at mother. She seems to think that I am still in the nursery although I have children of my own. She thinks they ought to be fed whenever they cry and that I should be carrying them around continually and that they ought to wear more clothes and what not. And she is really displeased when I tell her to mind her own business."

"It must be trying."

"It surely is. You have nothing to do but ride around all day and night on a horse with your silly army and you can never realize what I have to go through here. And the servants are impossible. I do two-thirds of the work in this house myself. It's no wonder I'm all tired out when night comes."

"What do you do it for?" inquired René with a man's amazing ignorance.

"What do I do it for? Who would do it if I didn't?" demanded Isabelle without pausing to become too definite concerning the nature or the extent of the task of which she complained.

"I'm sure I don't know," admitted her husband hastily. And so that minor crisis passed without further incident.

"A woman's work is never done," she sighed. René nodded sympathetically. He had heard the expounding of this thesis so often that it had become a matter of dogma. He had never ventured to question, let alone doubt it.

"Men are free to come and go as they please," she went on. "The whole world waits on them. They are nomads at heart—always journeying somewhere for some stupid cause—always light hearted, and why shouldn't they be?"

"I can't say that I have such a gay life," argued René cautiously. "War isn't exactly the tournament that you seem to think it is. We had a pretty dangerous time of it day before yesterday. We rode into an ambush up on the Moselle and had to cut our way out. For fifteen minutes it was a fight, stirrup to stirrup and ax to ax. Twenty of our men got their skulls crushed in the first tilt. The Duke's horse went down under him and I got a dent in my buckler that it will take some time to straighten out. Arnfeld hadn't many men and he wasn't risking them in a fair open fight, but a few men can do a lot of damage in a cul de sac . . . Vaudemont's archers must have been helping him. They picked off a scandalous lot of horses. And then a high north wind came up. I never hope to get into a more disagreeable fight. Arnfeld's men on the cliffs kept rolling boulders down onto us, and. . . ."

"It must have been exciting," commented Isabelle. "But while I think of it I must tell you about the visitor I had to-day. Your mention of Vaudemont reminded me of it. Margot, one of his cousins, and mine, too, for that matter, came to see me from Besan-

con. She is a charming girl, not at all like her Burgundian relatives. She is not very pretty but she dresses beautifully. She had a kirtle made of Provençal silk slashed and plaited at the side and caught up with a rope of gold at the bosom . . .”

René's battle ended abruptly. He drew up a stool and sat down to gaze at his wife in rapt attention. Her conversation had nothing much to do with his interest. He scarcely heard her as she went on from Margot to other maidens and from Provençal silks to the prevailing modes in Bourges and Paris. But as she talked he looked into her eyes and turned over and over again in his mind an old unanswerable riddle.

What manner of being was this, his wife? Death stood at her elbow and she gave it only a passing notice. She spoke of it as something undignified and disagreeable and totally out of place in polite society. Wars raged beyond the walls as they had been raging for years. Men crawled back from the valleys to Nancy bloody and horrible. Yet this child who would have fainted at the sight of a single wound, dismissed war and its dangers as topics unworthy of serious discussion. She had a keen intelligence and a penetration as deep as her unfathomable eyes. Yet she chattered of gowns and styles and the petty economics of the ducal kitchen.

From the hall below came the muffled voices of the guards and the scraping of feet—scraps of conversation that gave René a picture of the melodrama that was being enacted at the foot of the curving stairs. Soldiers were laying out the body of Sampigny for a midnight burial. A priest was chanting in a low tone and a woman was weeping half audibly.

“I have a fearful headache to-night,” said Isabelle.

"I had such a difficult day with the children. And then I wasn't helped any by the trouble you started when you came home. You haven't much consideration for anyone, have you, René."

"I suppose not," he admitted with mechanical contrition. His ears were straining for further sounds of the weird rites below. "I am naturally thoughtless and I don't suppose I shall ever be any different."

"Do you love me?" inquired the white wraith unexpectedly.

"Certainly . . . Do you need proof of it after all these years?"

The priest's monotone was more audible now. René wondered that Isabelle should not have noticed it. . . .

"Out of the depths I have cried unto Thee, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice. . . ."

The lady sighed.

"One always needs proof of a man's love," she said. "It is such an uncertain thing." Her voice was thin and detached, as much a phantom as the eerie whiteness of her slim body against the black curtains.

Blood was running from the wound in René's shoulder and dropping now and then in little beads on the floor. . . .

"Let Thine ears be attentive to the voice of my supplication."

"You never seem to be interested in anything I say to you, René. I had hoped that my life might be different from my mother's—that I might see my husband once in a while and that wars might not be eternally bothering me. But it is always the same. You go about having a good time and I sit here alone and slave. . . ."

"If Thou, O Lord, shalt mark our iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand it . . .?" And further muffled weeping came up from the hall. For there were

many women in the palace who might, with reason, lament Sampigny's passing.

There was a mist before René's eyes. Isabelle was a luminous spot in a void. The flambeaux were waving plumes of red and gold. The arras stirred in a draught with a motion felt rather than seen. The aroma of incense was stealing up the stairs. The ritual of the dead went on and on.

"You may kiss me, my René. . . . I shan't see you any more to-night. I am so tired, my dear . . . And my head aches fearfully."

"*Dies iræ, dies illa . . . Solvet sæclum in favilla. . . . Dona eis requiem. . . . Sempiternam . . .*"

There followed the sound of a door creaking on its hinges, and then the wailing of the wind. They were bearing the body of De Sampigny out into the storm . . .

"What's all that noise about downstairs?" demanded Isabelle petulantly.

"Oh, one thing and another," replied René dully.

"I can't imagine what this house is coming to. Go down and tell them that I want quiet . . ."

"Yes, my dear," said René as he kissed her.

"I shall see you in the morning when my headache is gone," she told him. I have ever so many things to talk to you about."

"We ride out to a new fight to-morrow," he answered. "I may not see you."

"Another fight!"

She became more cold, if that were possible, and drew away from him.

"Good night, my love."

She did not answer him. He walked slowly toward the door and climbed the tower stairs to his own room. He threw himself onto the bed without bothering to take off the remainder of his gear.

VI

OYEZ, seigneurs, it was a grand cavalcade that rode out through the Porte de la Craffe in the morning light . . . three thousand men, most of them horsed, and all of them in gleaming armor. Lancers with roses in their helmets and pennons on their long spears, harquebusiers with green streamers across their shoulders, cannoneers in Burgundian mail riding proudly ahead of their trailing bombards. Horses freshly groomed and clean. . . .

The storm had passed and the sun was coming out of the green hills to look at Nancy through a veil of mist. The roads were muddy but solid as when the Roman legionaries had put them there a thousand years before, and the army flowed out through the arch and toward the morning, a stream of steel.

At the head of the column rode René in his black armor, heavy eyed and serious but giving no indication of the pain in his shoulder where the weight of his hardware rested. Black trappings draped his horse. A black pennant fluttered at the staff of the guidon by his side. All in somber contrast to the kaleidoscope of color that flashed over the metal of his troops.

René sat in his saddle like an iron casting, a figure to attract attention even among these thousands of the hardest surfaced males in Christendom. He had the soldier's poise, the leader's calm assurance, the victor's confidence. He did not turn to look at his column. He knew that it would be there, close at his heels, in fair order, alert and ready to follow him to hell or better known dangers without comment and very probably without thought.

Lorrainers made up the bulk of the army, and this was strange in an age of mercenaries. But the expert technicians of the free lance were not lacking. There were Scots archers and German and English pikemen and Irish lancers and Croatian cavaliers, a babel of them whose knowledge of French was confined to mess call and orders for battle. They marched in silence as soldiers have always marched in the mists of the morning, thinking not of the death that might lie at the end of the road, but of the sleep left behind on the inner side of the moat, of the breakfast half tasted and the wine still undrunk in the cellars of the Coq d'Or.

Patriotism—they had none except the principle that René wasn't a bad chap and certainly could hold his own against any swordsman in the corps. Enthusiasm—they did not need it. Soldiering was a business and a true business man could not be expected to get excited over the routine of a day's work. They had been ordered out on some silly errand and they were going.

From the tower of the ducal palace two women and an old man watched the column sear the frosty greenery of the marshlands. Tears were on the eyes of the Duke Charles, partly because of the stirring spectacle and partly because he had an infernal pain in his knee.

"Damn the rheumatism," he observed with fervor. "Damn the rheumatism. Damn the weather that keeps me cooped up here like a trussed chicken while that boy goes out to fight alone . . ."

"Charles!" broke in the Duchess Margaret. "Calm yourself instantly. It will not do your rheumatism any good to work yourself up into a temper. If you had showed a little of this mood last night, René might have been induced to stay home . . ."

"Don't preach to me," roared the Duke with unex-

pected zeal. "I'm tired of listening to your silly platitudes. A lot you know about war! You with your eternal moral philosophy and good advice. God of battles give me strength to live a week here with the like of you."

The Duchess and Isabelle stared at him only half believing their ears. Whatever might be the failings of the Duke, rebellion against domestic criticism had never been one of them. He had had too much experience with Margaret. There was a moment of silence of which he was only partly conscious, for he was looking out across the walls toward Metz. The distance was a shimmering veil of soft tint: rose and violet and gray-green—the foreground a pastel through which rolled the molten light of the steel trapped squadron. The rain had left diamond dust on the hills, and the tiled roofs of the city were beaded and lacquered with the morning dew. And Charles was looking not at the present picture but back along a road of memories toward times when there had been other misty mornings and other marching men.

"Women make me tired," he declared suddenly.

"Charles!" repeated the Duchess, and the color went out of her cold lips.

"I mean it," declared the Duke. "And I'm telling it to you in terms that you may be able to understand. I'm sick of piety that's just another name for selfishness. I'm sick of long faces and patient remonstrance and sighs of resignation and motherly care and meddling and gossiping and ice-cold kindness and eternal bickering. It's proof of the omniscience of God that women should be on this earth. Only an all-wise God could guess why they were ever invented."

"Charles," said the Duchess calmly when he paused for breath, "you are growing singularly impolite."

"You are growing older," observed Isabelle a bit maliciously. The latter gibe drew the Duke's anger.

"I know that," he admitted reddening. "My future is on the other side of the tomb door. And I'll concede just for argument that in my day I was willing to follow a skirt as far as the next man. I was blind and foolish as most men. My marriage proves that. But age isn't any barrier to the truth. And I live my life all over again when I see what René is getting."

"He's just like yourself," said the Duchess Margaret.

"He deserves all he gets," declared Isabelle heatedly.

Charles swung about momentarily forgetful of his twitching leg.

"That's enough of that," he warned with a narrowing of his eyes and a low huskiness of tone that was new to the women. "René is a good boy—though why is something I never could make out. He deserves something better than he got and I'm the one who knows it.

"You, my dear Margaret, have always been prating about the honor of your house and you've been too busy meddling with other people's morals to worry about your own obligations as a wife. You have been a saintly woman and a good mother, but your rating as a companion wouldn't be high.

"Isabelle has all your notions with my temper, which I am free to confess is poor. She thinks as you do that a husband is a wild creature who should not be intrusted with confidences and should be kept eternally in the leash.

"Your court is the most prudish in Europe and the most virtuous—outwardly—that it has ever been my misfortune to view. There isn't an acknowledged

courtezan inside the gates of Nancy but there are more foul-minded, backbiting, scandal-monging she-devils right under our own roof than ever have been gathered before under one covering since Cyrus took Babylon. The court of King Charles is rotten and the court of Duke Philippe smells to heaven but they're candid in their filth. . . ."

"Father!" ejaculated Isabelle in a shocked tone.

"Don't mind him, Isabelle," admonished Margaret meekly. "I am used to his abuse. This isn't the first time he has wanted to fill my house with demi-mondaines. He is like all the rest. He respects the trollops. . . ."

"Without admitting the truth of all that, I will say that you are partly right," interrupted the Duke. "I don't like women running around after troops because I don't like women. I do respect a trollop who is candidly a trollop. There's no hypocrisy about her. Whatever her motives, whatever her morals, she consoles men in their loneliness and that's more than can be said of the celibate wives who drive men in loneliness to the trollops."

He swore under his breath with considerable zeal and commendable fluency and stamped down the stone stairs.

"Father makes a very good speech," said Isabelle with a half smile.

The Duchess Margaret stared into a distance doubly hazy because of the mist that had gathered over her eyes.

"I can't imagine what has come over him," she answered softly. "I suppose after all that men are just animals who cannot respect virtue because they cannot understand it."

"But they are interesting animals," commented Isa-

belle. She was reviewing all that her father had said and marveling that so obviously outrageous a philosophy had come so close to fact.

VII

THE Duke Charles hobbled out into the street and across the Place des Ducs with a stout cudgel for a cane and an ill temper for company. The few officers of the guard left at the palace avoided him with a skill born of long experience. The townsfolk gave no opportunity for a chance encounter. For Charles' temperamental demonstrations were a matter of much concern to those about him. They were not too frequent (a fact due largely to his activities in the field) but certainly impartial and effective.

Nancy was astir though the sun had been up scarcely half an hour. Housewives were chattering in the doorways along the Street of the Thievish Moor and they seemed to be none too pleased with the news that they felt called upon to exchange. Wars were a custom like meals and marriage and mass. From bride to matron the women of the town had become used to them. But there was a growing belief that armistice periods of a day or two should be included in the ducal military policies.

Helene, fair daughter of Henri the Miller, was the center of an admiring and sympathetic group as she wept her protest into a crumpled bridal veil. Marie Morestal, a widow by the last casualty list, sat on her doorstep and stared over the walls toward the northern hills. "Nosey" Pierre and his charming wife "Margot of the Facile Tongue" were checking over their accounts with no evidence of encouragement.

Margot had forecast this situation but there was scant satisfaction in that. The drinks that had flowed to celebrate the return of the soldiery could be classified merely as drinks that had flowed to celebrate the return of the soldiery. They represented no tangible wealth on the slate.

Whatever Duke Charles' state of mind he would not have been popular on this morning. He sensed it as he walked along between groups of womenfolk that suddenly became silent at his approach. And the reception did not add to his mental comfort. He had left the palace with no particular objective, but his feet led him unerringly if painfully in the path of many a previous journey—toward the *Porte de la Craffe* whence the soldiers, his soldiers, had followed the boy René out into the morning.

Dead men walked with the Duke, the boon companions of his bachelor days who had made his palace the merriest spot in Europe, the hard free lances who had borne him company on more than one harebrained expedition, the men he had left face down in the valleys of Luxembourg, the men he had met in friendly joust, the men he had carved with more or less friendly intent in dim alleys here and there, the brave enemies who had gone down under the steel of Lorraine, the few friends who, unfortunately, had died in bed, the great heterogeneous population of a long memory—all of them marched with him, a silent host that did not seem to understand his infirmity.

The city was still—oppressively still—for now the mailed knights were far away and the gossips were bandying their complaints in whispers. . . . Presently at the *Porte de la Craffe* arose a clamor that caused the Duke to forget his rheumatic twinges. A booming voice, vibrant as the echo of a serpentine, hollow as

the crash of a shield and as metallic, rolled down the Street of the Thievish Moor:

"Woe to Burgundy . . . Woe to those who dwell in evil, for the curse of the Lord is on the land . . ."

And then a more incoherent shouting as the voices of a dozen guards mingled raucously. The Duke caught a few phrases monotonous as a chant:

"Way for the Holy Pilgrim! Way for the Man of God! Way for the prophet!"

"For the love of the sainted Michel," ejaculated the Duke. "Am I never to be allowed to be wicked without a lot of professional interference?"

Once more the booming voice, louder, clearer, more brasslike in its equality:

"Woe to the men who live by the sword! For death shall shrivel their right arms and their war horses shall tread them under foot. . . ."

"Way for the Holy Pilgrim! Way for the Man of God!"

Charles cut through the Street of the White Horse with an agility that would have done him credit in younger and less rheumatic days, and came face to face with a cowed figure leaning on a staff, a tall, broad ox of a man who plodded along in a leisurely manner with a swagger that approached insolence.

"Woe to those who sit in the high places and hear not the warning," cried the pilgrim at the top of his leather lungs.

"Who are you?" inquired Charles with excusable curiosity.

"I am Jean of Nowhere, a poor sinner," bellowed the pilgrim. "And I have come into Lorraine to sound a warning."

"I," said the Duke, "am Charles of Lorraine. And I am not taken with your voice or your philosophy."

"Woe unto those who sit in the high places and heed not the warning," repeated Jean of Nowhere. "I suppose my voice is a little rough but my heart is in it and I am putting it to excellent use leading the wayward back into the paths of virtue."

"You should speak to my wife," advised Charles. "She is interested in social service and all that sort of thing. As for me I am peculiarly of a military turn of mind and naturally I don't take kindly to misguided reformers who would halt me in my Heaven-sent mission of knocking the iniquity out of the ungodly opposition."

"You evidently misunderstood my meaning," put in the pilgrim somewhat hastily. "I came not to criticize but to warn. And as I have already announced my warning has not so much to do with Lorraine as with Burgundy where Philippe rules from Hesdin."

"That puts the matter in an entirely different light," admitted the Duke after a moment of thought. "Quite probably we may reach an agreement. You will find no one in this vicinity more willing than myself to admit that Burgundy needs a warning. Many times I have attempted to deliver it in person, but unfortunately I didn't have enough of this new-fangled nuisance, artillery. Just what is your warning?"

"I have been far afield," replied Jean of Nowhere, dropping once more into his dramatic bass. "I have met men journeying from the desolation that was once France. And I have heard many strange tales."

"One does," admitted Charles. "I have heard them myself."

"But long ago—in my father's time there were stories in Lorraine that a virgin would one day arise and overthrow the English power in France—that France would step gloriously out of the bondage of Burgundy

—that peace would come upon the world after a century of bloodshed.”

“That sounds like one of Margaret’s stories,” criticized the Duke. “I don’t set much stock in these forecasts.”

“But—” The brazen voice had gone to its most sonorous depths and the thrill of its timbre brought startled faces to a dozen windows. “But, your Grace, this prophecy will be fulfilled. The virgin who is to save France has arisen. She has heard the call to arms and before the year is out she will have the English standing in a shambles. France the glorious will be free.”

“A virgin, did you say?” the Duke inquired without any great show of credulity. “Without owning to any knowledge on the subject I should say you may find Margaret’s court full of candidates. However, I am an old man and skeptical.” He summoned a sentry.

“Take Brother Jean to the palace and see that he is well cared for. My compliments to Milady the Duchess and ask that she hear the interesting and important message of this holy man.”

And he resumed his journey toward the Porte de la Craffe while Brother Jean of Nowhere followed the guard and sounded his warning to all who would listen:

“Woe! Woe to Burgundy! For the hand of the Lord hovers over the land and many men now living will be dead to-morrow.”

“A cheerful person,” observed the Duke to himself, “but undoubtedly right in some particulars.”

VIII

A LEAGUE out of Nancy the old Roman road forked and René's captains took their paths toward Toul and Vezelise. René for no tangible reason, led the bulk of the force on toward Metz. For more than an hour the men marched in sleepy silence little knowing, little caring who might be their chief or where they might be going. And this did not mean anything to René, who was a veteran. For he too, was silent, nodding in sleep on his somnambulistic horse.

Then the sun broke fully through the mists and the drying roads furnished a steam of their own. A ripple of life ran along the column. The bellowing gutturals of a Swiss guard broke through René's dull fatigue like a call to arms:

"This is the damndest army I ever was in!"

A less voluminous but equally enthusiastic voice answered him:

"Army? Who the hell called it an army?"

René sat up in his saddle with new zest and clucked briskly to his horse. The excitement of battle was beginning to warm his blood. For these men behind him were not the ghosts they had seemed in the half-light. They were soldiers—his loyal soldiers. And they were in fine fettle for the work he had cut out for them.

"You oughta see the armor they issued to us when I was in the Italian army," boomed the protest of the Swiss guard. "There was a real army, I'll tell the world. This stuff that I'm wearing now doesn't fit me by three sizes and this here horse ain't had a meal in a year of Christmases."

"And the feed is rotten," complained another loyal soldier. "You get out here an' march an' march an' march an' all they give you is a slab o' blue bread. They surely lied to me when they got me to enlist."

"My hitch is over when I get outa this," came a new comment. "And I'm telling you brother it's my last job as a soldier. There ain't nobody going to drag me into another army. Not while I'm still able to go over the hill. It ain't so much the fightin' I mind but you got to walk so damn far to get to it."

And René smiled as he thought of the thorough-going discipline that distinguished the troops of Lorraine from those of the rest of the world.

Then the column broke into a joyous song about the superiority of the lancers as an arm of the military service in contrast to the foot soldiers, the artillery, and the harquebusiers. There were other stanzas having to do with the various and sundry animalcules that might be found under one's armor after a venture in the field. And after that followed some tender verses descriptive of the morals of one Genevieve of the Golden Hair. René's smile broadened. The spirit of his patriotic soldiery could not have been improved. The day was opening auspiciously.

It was just as the great male chorus was starting on stanza number fifty-five of the battle hymn that Raoul de Montfort, René's principal aide, rode up and bade him good morning.

"Where are we going?" inquired the knight.

"Metz," replied René.

"Well, don't blame me if you collect a lot of trouble," advised Raoul. "You can't say that you gave me much notice."

"How much do you need?"

"Well, I think that an attack on a town like Metz ought to be planned a few hours in advance—say eight or nine hours. I don't mind dying, you understand, I can even see certain advantages in getting carved in one of your off-hand battles. But, by the sweet-faced gargoyles of Saint Evre, I'd like to get some sleep while preparing for my funeral."

"How do you find the men?"

"They're in terrible shape. Sleepy and miserable. And the horses are a sight to behold. They were always that. Our horses are celebrated from Cologne to Bordeaux as the most useless lot of crow bait on the continent of Europe."

"Do you think we shall be able to get to Metz?"

"I doubt it. Everything is wrong. The roads are bad. The men are weary. The horses are just as they always have been. The garrison at Metz probably has been warned that we are on our way. The army is half spies and the other half louts. I shall be pleasantly surprised if we ever see Metz."

René who knew Raoul for one of the best generals in Lorraine and the sourest, accepted this warning of disaster with a singular lack of concern.

"After all," he commented more than half in earnest. "A really decisive defeat might not be so bad. I've frequently thought of it. I'm not cut out for soldiering and I stay at it only because there's such a good chance for getting killed."

"Those are my sentiments precisely," agreed Raoul. "Battle is the normal life for a man because it ends all his troubles so quickly. I've often wondered that the entire human race didn't commit suicide simultaneously. It would if it weren't that the cretin population is in such a large majority."

"A man comes into this terrible mess without being

asked whether he cares to be born or not. His parents push him along to suit themselves and he hasn't brains enough to protest. And then finally he is turned loose to shift for himself and complete the wreck."

"It's the age we live in," observed René with some sympathy. "We live too fast. You are about twenty-five years old and you are an older man than my father-in-law the Duke. I am twenty-one and I am older than you by thirty or forty years."

"That's it exactly. Here I am at an age that my mother persists in believing to be frightfully young and I've seen everything. There isn't a thrill left in the world, even in the prospect of braining a Burgundian."

And René sighed. For he understood.

"Well," said Raoul in a more businesslike tone. "What are we here for, and how are we going to do it?"

"We are going to capture Metz and Antoine de Vaudemont," replied René. "And how we do it is a matter of detail that concerns principally yourself."

"I don't believe that De Vaudemont is in Metz. The last I heard of him he was casting amorous eyes on the twenty-odd wives of Philippe the Good at Hesdin. A pleasant enough occupation but somewhat removed from the road we are following."

"He may be there still," admitted René. "But I don't think so. I shall be quite candid with you. I have acted in this affair entirely on information given me by a lady."

Raoul's long face became a bit longer.

"A lady!"

"Yes, a lady who stabbed me in the back. She has the most beautiful eyes in Christendom—eyes that

carry the changing glints of the firelight . . . If I had my lute, Raoul, I could sing a beautiful chanson about her. She . . ."

"She stabbed you in the back," repeated Raoul.

"Yes. It would have been nothing at all if my chain shirt had been any good. And her eyes are as deep as a Persian proverb and as immoral."

Raoul turned in his saddle to look back at the column, the plodding horses, the shining steel, the sweating men . . . hundreds of soldiers going out to look into the hollow eyes of death.

"And that's why we're here," he commented. "I'm glad to hear of that. I was afraid that wars were getting serious. In my own case I know that I should be sorry to die for any stupid abstract principle and I am sure that the boys back there feel as I do about it. How much more glorious to die because a beautiful lady stabbed some one in the back."

"In a way you're right. Your principles are beyond criticism. But I do not think you understand the case. My back has nothing to do with it except that it is sore and may give me trouble in a fight. We are actually proceeding against Metz and De Vaudemont."

"Yes, I gathered that. But we are proceeding against Metz and De Vaudemont on information furnished you by this lady who knifed you. That complicates the situation admirably."

"The complications are more numerous than you suspect, my dear Raoul," admitted René. "In the first place, and I may say it without any claim to originality, women are queer creatures. A man who must be eternally messing with camp and battlefield can never hope to know much about them. But I have found it an excellent principle to hear everything they have to say and believe nothing."

"Unquestionably," said Raoul. "But we are marching on Metz."

"Let me tell you the rest of it," broke in the young Duke of Bar. "I am behaving quite logically."

"Then she advised you to stay away from Metz."

"You are progressing, Raoul. Normally that would be a good guess. But as it happens you would be wrong. By every device of a female of her talent she hinted that I should go to Metz."

Raoul did not reply. He had lost track of the causation.

"You see," René went on to explain. "This is no ordinary woman. She is more skillful at her cozening than any of her kind with whom I have had to deal before this. She emphasized Metz, which, under ordinary circumstances would have led me to go to any other town in Europe to look for De Vaudemont. But her manner led me to believe that she was expecting me to act illogically.

"The conclusion is obvious. If she expected that I should stay away from Metz as a result of her hinting, then it follows that she wished me to stay away."

"And she stabbed you by way of emphasis?" Raoul's tone was expressive of mild interest.

"I can't say as to that," answered Rene. "She is a woman of the south and such women are even less comprehensible than other women. She looked quite like the lady of the Firelight whom all of us pursue—even you, my acidulous friend—and in a way she acted her part. The fragrant lure of her was overpowering, her heart was open, her surrender abject, and then—the stroke of a knife and once more she was the princess unattainable, the cold phantom of boundless desire . . . the . . ."

"You sound like a very dreary chanson," commented Raoul. "But I am glad you told me all this. It sets my mind so completely at rest. Our cause is so well defined and our advance information is so complete! Well this probably will be my last battle—and yours—and some fool with a gift for rhyme will write us up in a poem and the whole world will thrill to the story of our heroism.

"You reason so logically that I cannot but withdraw my objections. Antoine de Vaudemont and this spirituelle wench of whom you prate so eloquently probably will be in Metz, worse luck for us. You should have been a philosopher."

"Oh, I am a philosopher, but more practical than most philosophers."

"I had noticed that. Your confidence in the correctness of your deductions is marvelous. . . I might say sublime."

René smiled and hummed a little song.

"You wrong me, Raoul," he said, "when you hint lack of premise. And you flatter me when you suggest that I am as logical a creature as yourself. My reasoning is not of the best quality. My saintly mother-in-law the Duchess Margaret was anxious that I study more of the rules of logic, but my time was so occupied that I could not pursue the course as diligently as she wished. As a result I am never quite sure of myself when guessing what a man may do under a given set of circumstances. And women, of course, are beyond logic."

"So are some logicians," declared Raoul.

"Not those who are willing to doubt the omnipotence of the syllogism," countered René. "In my own case I know that the elusive lady will be at Metz partly because of the circumstances I outlined to you and for

the rest because I sent a guard after her to see that she didn't go anywhere else."

"In that event," said Raoul encouragingly, "we may expect the worst."

IX

METZ lay like a dead city, a chaos of candle-snuffer towers, spires, bastions, and high walls. The great bulk of the château stood argenteous in the moonlight, cold and icelike save where the fires of the watch flared in the upper turrets. Points of silver moved along the ramparts as the sentries walked their never ending rounds. And in the frozen swamps of the Moselle slept the troops of René.

The young commander was up late that night. It was the part of commanders to forego sleep on the eve of battle, to go over and over in their minds their simple plans for assault, to rehearse mentally their elemental tactics of shock and slash, and to fret themselves into a fine nervous state before a single unit had been ordered into contact with the enemy. And René, comfortably sheltered by a tent that had been the Duke Charles', showed a certain reverence for this tradition. But he did not seem to be concerning himself with the defenses of Metz nor the action that would carry his troops against them on the morrow. Instead he sat on a stool with his long legs stretched out before him, improvising on his lute. He had the confidence of youth in the finality of his own decisions. He had made his plans. He had ordered the disposal of his men. There was nothing to be gained by worrying in the dark. And the morning would undoubtedly take care of itself.

He sang softly to himself unmindful of the weird

quality given to the scene by the flambeau and the pictures it painted on the striped silk of the tent. . . .

*"Lady of Firelight, many men follow you
Out on the highroad where ghostlike you're beckoning.
Brave hearts and true hearts, they list to the call of you
Die for the sight of you, die without reckoning.*

*"Brave men ride forth to your calling, my lady,
Out where death's mantle is falling, my lady.
Always they follow no matter the danger,
Always they worship you, goddess and stranger—
Wraith of the Firelight."*

There was nothing unusual in the situation. To-night an army was asleep under the walls of a mighty city. To-morrow there would be a battle and men would die. But that, too, was a matter of routine. It was obvious that whether or not a man went down in battle he must die anyway at some time or another. Wars did not really destroy life, they merely brought it to a somewhat premature end.

Raoul had been with him until nearly midnight, discussing the movement of the troops. He had left forecasting calamity, and that pleased René immensely inasmuch as it proved that matters were proceeding normally.

Outside the tent a sentry passed now and then, his progress attended by a bell-like tinkle of chain and occasionally by his expressed opinion of guard duty and similar devices of the all-evil. He went by just as René finished his song and for the moment the camp was still.

Then the young Duke of Bar heard a rustling sound as if a breeze might be stirring the tent. But there was no breeze. The flame of the torch stood like a lance

point balanced on its bronze capital. The silken flaps were motionless.

René still tinkled the lute, a plaintive, wandering melody in slow measure that gave no hint of his keen attention. The rustling continued and presently he traced it to its source. A hand was moving up and down the front of the tent seeking the fastening of the flap. Without ceasing to play he took a quick inventory of his side arms and awaited results.

*"Lady of Firelight, many men follow you
Out on the highroad where ghostlike you're
beckoning . . ."*

His voice was as calm as it had been at home in the Hall of the Stag. It retained that quality even when the curtains suddenly parted and a woman stepped hastily into the lighted circle of the flambeau. But as she drew back her veil, René ceased to sing and dropped the lute.

"Yvette!"

"Yes, my dear Duke, Yvette. You didn't expect me? Then we stand even. I didn't expect you. And I need hardly say that my call is no more informal than yours . . . You haven't welcomed me."

René smiled and drew up another chair into the light of the torch.

"Please be seated, and accept my assurance that it is a pleasure to see you again under any circumstances," he said lightly. "You are very beautiful. Even more so than when I saw you last . . . Dry clothes and rest make such a difference, don't they? Do you know your eyes are as deep as love and as inscrutable as—By the way, how did you get through the lines?"

She stared at him haughtily.

"Would you imagine that I might have any trouble

getting through the lines?" she inquired. "I am not like other women. I go where I please. When I choose to be like a wraith I am a phantom as immaterial as the mist, and guards do not stop me—especially the sleeping ones. Be bold with caution—that's my motto."

"You are surely ethereal," admitted René. "I think I have already commented on the fairy qualities of your beauty. But I can see even in this bad light that your hand is bandaged and I am dimly aware of a pain in my back, and these two pieces of evidence would seem to constitute something of an argument against your spiritual status."

She returned his gaze without boldness, without apology. He thought that he had never seen a woman so perfectly poised.

"I can't say just why I tried to kill you," she said at length. "I am of the south and a bit emotional. Perhaps I acted hastily."

"Perhaps," agreed René. "I have not attempted to explain the phenomenon."

"Nor I. Motives are so hard to classify . . . Hatred may have driven me—or fear—or love. I am elemental, René. I don't think I really understand myself."

"You are a woman and I can well believe you, if you know what I mean."

"Well, at any rate I am here to make amends. I shouldn't be talking to you like this. My good friends in Metz probably would strangle me if they were to learn that I had come to you this way, alone. But I could not let you ride to your doom without warning."

"Warning! Are you bringing me another warning?"

She ignored the implication.

"If you attack in force you cannot hope to win," she said. "My advice is that you bring fifty lances—two hundred and fifty men—to the tower across from the city at dawn.

"The sunken road will protect your approach and you will find no opposition there.

"I shall be ready to meet you and one or two of your aides at the postern gate of the town and lead you to the tunnel that connects the tower and the citadel. The commandant has been warned by his spies that you are planning a frontal attack, so he has withdrawn the forces that would normally be assigned to the river wall. If you do as I say you should have no trouble taking the city."

René looked at her white face and marveled that her dark eyes did not waver under his scrutiny.

"You seem to have no scruples about treachery, my dear," he observed softly. "You are a many-sided jewel."

"I am not here to talk of ethics," she told him. "I owe nothing to De Vaudemont. Henri du Bois, his commandant, struck me with the flat of his sword when I returned from Nancy. He blamed me for the killing of Sampigny. And Antoine would not listen to my complaint. I intend to pay by scores and also to collect what is owing to me, my Duke."

"And if many men die in the process of collection . . . ?"

"Many men would be proud to die for me, René. Just as many women would willingly die for you. We must all die some day, no matter how we live, and please God, it is better to die a romantic death in youth than shrivel up in hideous old age. . . . Romance is the dominant figure in my life, René. It may be

illogical but then a logical woman knows no happiness. . . ."

"You are wonderful, my dear, and as cold-blooded a romanticist as I have ever seen."

"I am not cold-blooded, René . . . I am not cruel. It is merely that cruelty is the part of love. . . ."

René did not answer her at once. He picked up his lute and strummed it absently as he looked at her.

"I cannot fathom you," he said after a time. "But for that matter neither can I fathom any other woman. And you are beautiful enough to make a man forget golden coronets and to-morrow's battles. And I am susceptible to flattery and lonesome enough to hope for love."

If he felt the pain in his shoulder he gave no indication of it.

The girl was silent for a moment, then gathered her cloak about her and drew her veil across her forehead.

"To-morrow," she said in a low voice. "To-morrow, my Duke, we may meet again, you and I . . . and remember the postern."

René gave her a pass through the lines and bowed low before her.

"I thank you, my lady," he said. "Farewell until to-morrow. And I shall remember the postern. . . ."

Presently she was gone. René called the guard and dispatched him for Raoul. The lute was lying unnoticed when the warrior, a bit sleepier and more peevish than usual, strode into the tent.

"What's got into you?" he demanded. "Insomnia on the eve of battle isn't a good sign."

"Change in plans," announced René cheerily. "We shan't approach the river wall. We attack at dawn in three main divisions. You will take the left flank and strike from a position to the south. Remy de Mont-

fort will move from the north. I shall take the center column and all the artillery and drive down directly on the Main gate."

"But," protested Raoul, "an hour ago we were agreed that such an attack would be hopeless. Doesn't it seem logical that the garrison will least expect an attack in force on the wall protected by the river? It has always been my belief that you hurt a man most when you hit him where he isn't expecting it."

"The circumstances have been altered," said René. "I have reason to believe that the enemy would be waiting for us if we followed out the original plan. And if so we might have difficulty keeping out of the river."

"But the strategy of seizing the postern," protested Raoul. "Surely a few men might be assigned to try for it while we are making our feint out in front."

"I noticed the postern," replied René. "But we shan't attack the postern. We make a frontal attack. Strike the tents but leave the fires alight. We move at once."



OYEZ, seigneurs, how the troops of Lorraine went into battle at the dawn.

As one mass they moved forward with pennons flying—in the van the lean brown veterans of a dozen sieges with scaling ladders, close behind them the cannoneers with their bombards, serpentines and what not. The valley of the Moselle shook with the pounding of hoofs and the heights of the Moselle echoed to an Angelus of steel.

Oyez, seigneurs, it was a splendid sight.

And in the city was consternation. It was too pre-

cipitate, this attack, too harebrained and unusual for description. The able generals in charge of the defense stood aghast at the unethical conduct of the besiegers.

Who were they to show such indecent haste in war! What right had they to upset the custom that demanded days of reconnoitering before an attack! It was preposterous and likewise disconcerting.

The guards, mace men, harquebusiers, ax men and tar pot wielders hurriedly roused from a sound sleep rushed to the ramparts, thoroughly indignant with a foe who thus dared to ignore the unwritten laws of their profession. Never before in the recent history of Metz had there been an attack at such an unearthly hour. Heaven knew battles were long enough when started in mid-afternoon. Moreover it made the tactics of defense a bit difficult, for the commanders had hoped to be able to post the garrison well in advance of the assault.

And from the massed steel of the onrushing Lorrainers arose the mixed battle cries so terrible in such a fray:

"For St. John and Lorraine!"

"Death to Vaudemont!"

"Keep your distance, you ill-begotten louts. Guide left in the front rank, you cross-eyed sons of Belial!"

Raoul was moving rapidly ahead, his disgruntled mob surging at his heels and answering his derisive yells in kind. Montfort, at the head of a crew that long since had lost all resemblance to a tactical unit, was driving forward along the Moselle but veering toward the left. And straight onward in the frontal attack rode René, his black armor glowing dully, a shadow in the purple of the rising sun.

The guards on the walls did not wait for the shock

of the assault. An arrow barrage, followed by a fine storm of missiles, greeted the warriors of Lorraine before they had reached the moat, and many a horse was riderless as the flying wedge brought its apex to the walls.

The moat, filled with fagots and late residents of Lorraine, was speedily taken. The suddenness of the attack and the force of the shock assured that from the first. The scaling ladders were thrown aloft while the artillery banged and snorted laboriously at the portcullis. And then began that hand-to-hand fighting, relentless warfare of individuals that made storming parties tedious. The flaming tar flowed down from the turrets. Mothers' sons fell as they have always fallen in battle, corpses that helped to fill the moat, corpses that crashed down upon the heads of their fellows clinging to the walls.

So it went through the heat of the day without so many losses considering the time of the day at which René had ordered the attack. Night found the defenses a bit shaken and somewhat depleted. The Lorrainers were in possession of the south barbican and the battling on the inner wall was progressing favorably when the attackers pulled down their ladders and withdrew for the day.

In his tent René checked up on the losses and decided that his time had not been badly spent. But when he picked up his lute it was to play an impatient, fretful melody indicative of a disturbed state of mind.

About the eighth hour came a youth in a black cloak who might not have been recognized as a soldier save for the bulge of a sword at his hip and the tinkle of chains as he stopped before the young Duke.

"Well?" inquired René, "what did you find out?"

"The postern was open," reported the youth. "I

had no trouble getting in. A woman met me and took me to a passage below the river tower. From that point a tunnel extended to the isolated redoubt about which you placed the guard this morning. I believe that if you had had troops waiting there they could have come into the city without opposition."

René smiled.

"So the postern was really open," he said half to himself. "I shouldn't have believed it . . . and there was no sign of a trick."

The messenger hesitated.

"Yes and no," he said. "I am certain that this woman was acting in good faith."

"She has a way of making people believe that," commented René.

"Well, you may judge for yourself. She seemed surprised that I had come alone, but she did not question me. We followed the line of the rampart for perhaps a hundred paces before we came to the tower that opens into the tunnel, and on the way she passed me by the sentries more than once.

"So we got through the tunnel without difficulty and found no opposition at the redoubt where she apparently expected your troops to be. When we looked out and could find no sign of you she seemed very angry . . . I thought she was about to weep. But she didn't.

"She said: 'Your commander does not trust me. Well no matter!' And then we turned back."

"You are a bit late delivering your news, my lad. Many a man is dead out there in the moat who might have lived to run up another wine bill at the Coq d'Or had you been a little more prompt."

"It was not my fault, your grace. I was ambushed on the way back."

René started forward.

"Ambushed!"

"Perhaps the word is not well chosen. I can only judge by appearances. We had come up into the tower and were back on the ramparts when we were suddenly surrounded by a score of Vaudemont's mercenaries who hadn't been there when we went in. I can't explain how it happened unless one of the guards had been more alert than we had suspected. I do not think that the woman had anything to do with it for the first archer who came within striking distance knocked her down and put me to the trouble of defending her. I had no heart for it. They had the advantage of numbers and I felt the lack of a decent foothold on the wall and something solid at my back.

"I killed the first one and took a slice at the second and then, I shall confess to you, my Duke, I jumped. I fell into the moat at the portcullis and heard them shouting to one another to open the gate and capture me. But just then your division came up to the wall. Somebody's dead horse fell on me and I wasn't able to get out until the fighting was over."

"I have always contended," said René, speaking of a cryptic matter concerning which the youthful messenger could have no understanding, "I have always contended that it does not pay to believe a woman. If she isn't deceiving you, she's deceiving herself. And there you are. . . . You shall get a reward for this day's work, my boy . . ."

Outside the camp fires were burning and the guard detail was attempting to tell the countryside of the manifold attractions of Genevieve and her golden hair. But the chorus was thin and tuneless. Most of the soldiers did not even hear it. They were asleep on the

cold ground beside their arms and horses and snoring with a peace-time zeal. Battles are a tedious business.

XI

ON the morning of the third day, seigneurs, the turn of battle seemed to have come. Inside the walls the garrison was suffering from exhaustion and the populace was shivering in fear of the bombards that made great noises and threw stone missiles into the streets. Four redoubts had fallen to René and the steel of Lorraine was circling the city even along the river banks.

On the ramparts the defenders, harried and dispirited, stood ready for a renewal of the conflict. The mists clung to the valley but the besiegers made no attempt to conceal their presence under such a screen. Out of the feathery fogs arose the cries of the leaders encouraging their muddy troops:

"Stand up to your work, you weak-spined worms! A lot of ten-year-old girls could do a better job of soldiering. A fine mess the world is getting into when they allow such nincompoops as you to play with swords. Keep your alignment, you hellions, or a lot of you will muster with the devil. . . ."

And these cheerful echoes of war were made strangely musical by the muffling atmosphere and the echoing hills.

The fog lifted and the Lorrainers charged and the bombards and serpentines crashed their stony arguments against the gate. By noon the last redoubt had fallen. The soldiery of Nancy had gained a foothold on the walls. The Grande Porte was a wreck and the young Duke of Bar stood with a formidable advance

guard before a barricade in the street. Metz was as good as won. And then a chevalier in red helmet and cuirass came charging through the lines from the rear with a message for René.

"Fleville!" ejaculated René who had recognized the red armor. "You show a commendable zeal for one so late. In another minute or so we should have been forced to capture Metz without your invaluable assistance."

Philippe, Marquis of Fleville, raised his visor.

"I'm sorry to have been late," he said. "I returned to Nancy from Bourges only last night and I have been in the saddle ever since. The Duke Charles impressed me into service as a messenger. He orders that you ask a truce, get the best terms available, and come home at once."

"What! Has he come to senility so soon?"

"Not the Duke Charles. He has the wisest old head in these parts and will have for many a year to come unless death takes him or he is forced to stay at home more frequently than one day out of every month."

"But a truce, man. Why should we be looking for a truce? We have won a battle. We have taken a town."

"The Duke foresaw all of that when he sent me. But the taking of Metz is a trifle to the affairs that have begun to stir in the world since you left Nancy. All Lorraine is in a frenzy. The virgin of the old legends has come forward and has promised to drive the English and Burgundians into the sea. To-morrow or next day we may ride into France with as many men as can be spared. The people have gone wild over this girl. Stay in Metz another two days and you may return to a depopulated Nancy."

"You are telling me this on the orders of the Duke?"

"In his very words, sir. He has seen this girl and has spoken with her and has pledged his aid. He has told her that he will ride with her to the king himself if no other volunteers."

"It sounds like a chanson that I might have written when I was much younger," replied René. "I can't imagine the Duke believing an old wives' tale or going crazy over a wench with military ambitions."

"You have not seen this girl, my Duke. She is as beautiful as the dawn and as white as ice."

"The description is not encouraging and we have taken Metz. The Duchess Margaret is white as ice, but the dear old Lady would be a bit out of place in a battle . . . Without reference to the charms of this fair damsel tell me just what the Duke said."

"His message is here, my Lord. He told me to describe the situation before delivering it to you. But he is insistent that you return." He handed René the rolled parchment and the pair retreated to the shelter of the arching gateway.

"There are strange things going on in Lorraine," the Duke had written. "On Tuesday a Holy Man came here crying a warning to Burgundy. I was much pleased although the Holy Man's voice is not the best, what with the weather and a general disregard for the best practices of oratory. The Holy Man said that a virgin would rise up and drive the English and Burgundians out of this country. This was good news although like the stories of Boson whom your sainted mother-in-law disliked so thoroughly.

"However, there was a certain amount of good sense in what he had to say—particularly regarding Burgundy—so I put up with him for a while. And then came this girl Jeanne, about whom I shall proceed to tell you.

"She is a good, straightforward little girl from Domremy, a town which I can't just remember at this writing. And for a child of less than seventeen years she has a remarkable poise and assurance. She was brought here by messengers from Robert de Baudricourt who is completely under her spell, lacking as he does my hard won experience and skepticism. Jeanne tells me that she is God's appointed messenger and I believe her. I am an old man and not easily deceived by women. And although I must confess that I have not had much contact with personally appointed messengers of God, I think there is something in her story.

"At any rate, my dear René, let us find out. I suppose that by this time you have Metz under your thumb and may hesitate to relinquish it. But consider, my son, that whether or not this virgin has the divine commission she describes, there is going to be a fine row in France and the chance to settle accounts with Burgundy will never be better. Certainly they cannot be improved by detaching a large garrison from our active service in order to hold Metz. Under such circumstances Metz would be an isolated outpost for the troops of Lorraine just at the moment when we should be doing a bit of concentrating. So sign a truce with Vaudemont and get back here as soon as you can or I shall be compelled to go adventuring myself.

"Your wife and children are in excellent health and things are deadly dull around here except for the matters I have just described. Affectionately, Charles.

"P.S. The attitude of the people in this vicinity amounts to a revolution. Men, women and children are one and all for following the virgin into France. As I said there is going to be a fine row. Please come home."

"Well," commented René to the Marquis of Fleville, "I suppose the war is over. Ride back to Nancy and tell the Duke that I shall be with him as soon as I can apologize to Antoine de Vaudemont for having taken up so much of his time . . ." And he strode through the breach into the city, crying aloud for his heralds.

At the château, De Vaudemont and Dubois were rallying their troops for a last stand with the zeal that one might show in an attempt to argue with a blizzard or the plague.

"Fight hard and we may be able to make some terms," urged Dubois.

"There isn't any option," observed a weary young captain. "We fight and die or we die without fighting, and I wish I had enlisted in a good Holy War that would have taken me to Syria or some place. . . ."

And the soldiers turned apathetically to their tar pots and stone piles while below the rattle of Lorraine armor blended into a steady, terrible crash. In a moment the troops of Nancy would be in the streets and there would be slaughter and rapine and flaming torches. . . .

A trumpet sounded,—a thin, insistent call that penetrated into the farthest edges of the din . . . And as it echoed it seemed to grow louder, for the competing noises were dying away. The pounding of hoofs stopped at once. Then the metallic crashes ended in a bell-like sound and presently there was a hush over the valley. A deep voice bellowed from the ranks of Lorraine:

"A truce! A truce! René d'Anjou, Duke of Bar, craves a truce and an audience with Antoine de Vaudemont and the defenders of Metz."

"What!" roared Dubois. "There's some trick in this.

I'd swear that wench had some part in it if I didn't have evidence to the contrary."

"A truce," repeated Antoine de Vaudemont. "It hardly seems possible.

"It isn't," declared Dubois with a shake of the head. "It would make things easier for them if we were to stop fighting now that they are taking the last barricade. Hand-to-hand butchery in narrow alleys is always a messy affair."

"And still we have to deal with René d'Anjou," De Vaudemont reminded him. "Nobody can say what governs his strategy. He may be attempting a *coup* and then again he may be just tired of fighting."

"A truce," demanded the herald. "A truce and an audience for René de'Anjou, Duke of Bar."

And then to the amazement of the defenders the checked Lorrainers withdrew through the gate and began to reform their ranks with considerable bewilderment outside the town. René and the herald were admitted to the château and escorted to the cold, dark *salle des chevaliers* where Vaudemont and Dubois stood waiting beside the fire. René lifted his black visor and looked at De Vaudemont unemotionally.

"I should like to have you consent to a truce," he said. "And it is because I realize the strangeness of the request that I have come to make it in person."

"What's the catch?" inquired De Vaudemont.

"There isn't any. Our men are already outside the town. All I wish is your promise that details will not be hampered in their removal of the wounded and that we be allowed to withdraw from this neighborhood without further fighting."

De Vaudemont looked at him closely to detect signs of a failing mentality.

"You'll pardon me if I don't quite understand," he said.

"It is a stupid sort of proposition," admitted René. "I should much prefer to go on fighting. Every one knows that I'm not the person to ruin a good battle . . . particularly when I have it won. But I have just received a message from my father-in-law, your worthy relative, who tells me that a lovely riot is under way in France and that very shortly England and Burgundy may fight between themselves for what's left of France or France may be permanently rid of the pair of them."

"That sounds reasonable," answered De Vaudemont affably. "I had heard from our cousin, Philippe of Burgundy. And that is the reason, if I may be permitted to say so, that you were able to crash into this town so easily. Normally, I can assure you, there would have been enough of a garrison here to make the attack interesting for you."

"Please don't apologize," put in René. "It was a perfectly executed battle in nearly every respect. I think Dubois' disposition of archers on the east wall might have been better executed, but that of course is debatable. On the other hand, our bombardiers could stand quite a bit of training. However, take it all in all, the technical honors were about even and I think that you can grant my request for a truce without loss of dignity."

"I should rather cut your throat," observed Vaudemont cheerily. René smiled.

"Yes," he agreed, "I suppose you would. And, my dear Antoine, I should do as much for you any day. I have frequently regretted the silly codes that compel a couple of knights to settle their differences with armies instead of a pair of bare swords in an alley. It would be so much simpler—so much more honest—to fight

as candid cutthroats fight: to do our maneuvering by bribing a few sons of Judas in each other's camps and conduct our battles through the agency of hired female assassins."

De Vaudemont was silent. Dubois' sardonic smile stretched itself and his sallow skin tightened over his protruding teeth until in the half-light of the dim hall it seemed that a skull was peering through his visor.

"What's to prevent my killing you here and now?" the general inquired with just a trace of animosity.

"Two things," René told him. "One is that you know I killed De Sampigny, a better swordsman than yourself, in a fair fight. The second is that even in these degenerate days a gentleman doesn't do such things. If I were killed here my worthy relative Antoine might inherit Lorraine in my stead, but I doubt that even the aid of Burgundy could keep him from being drawn and quartered by the loyal seigneurs whose uncomplaining service would be part of his heritage."

"Dubois talks too much," commented Vaudemont. "You must pardon him. You know that while I should be perfectly willing to kill you in any honorable way I cannot permit that you be insulted in my poor house."

René bowed low. De Vaudemont started to speak again but he was interrupted by a wailing from below stairs, a woman's hysterical weeping. The count looked toward the stairway obviously annoyed. Dubois grinned again and slouched insolently against the fireplace.

"As if I didn't have enough to worry about without all this caterwauling," protested De Vaudemont.

"Don't be put out on my account," said René. "I have heard women cry before. They have a way of doing that sort of thing when the danger is all over." Dubois guffawed and his armor tinkled in cadence with

his laughter. The wailing became a shriek and presently ended in maniacal chattering.

"It's her sister, Marie," commented De Vaudemont. "She seems to be out of her mind."

"He shouldn't be in a hurry," observed Dubois. "The little comedy in the courtyard would interest him I am sure."

"There is no time to waste on such things," stated De Vaudemont. Dubois stared at him with mock horror more corpselike than his smile.

"No time," he repeated. "And you a Christian, my lord! He owes at least a prayer and should be allowed to pay his respects."

De Vaudemont's face tightened into little groups of knots.

"Very well," he conceded. "If the Duke of Bar will accompany me we shall make our devotions together."

"Gracious of you I am sure," sneered Dubois.

"Pray don't mention it," deprecated René. "Whatever the occasion there can be no harm in saying a few prayers, although I must confess that if the prayers are in your behalf, brother Dubois, they may represent a considerable waste of effort."

Dubois laughed again.

"You don't quite understand the situation," he said. "But you will." He turned from the fireplace to follow De Vaudemont, who had already started down the stairs. "The chapel is immediately below, your grace, and mind the steps. They are quite slippery and there is reasonable hope that you may break your neck."

René entered the tourelle after the count and close together they wound down the stone spiral to a narrow door that gave into a broad Gothic chamber. Before

them ranged alternately dim halos of mournful wax candles and black velvet shadows.

René stood for a moment with his hand on his sword hilt blinking into the darkness. Then he realized that this was actually a chapel. The little white altar was sunk into a recess in the wall farthest from the door and before it was a black bier on which lay something with a white sheet over it. A girl whose disheveled hair streamed from beneath her veiling knelt at a prie-dieu shivering in an ecstasy of grief. Red vigil lamps flickered upon the altar. The pale candles beamed faintly through a mist of incense.

René shuddered involuntarily. Death here in this weird setting seemed somehow entirely different from the thing that had stalked side by side with the fighting men out on the walls for the past two days. There it had been an incident of no particular moment. Here it was presented in all its terrible fidelity . . . unreal . . . inscrutable.

"A pretty scene," snarled a voice in his ear. René felt suddenly that even in this chapel at the steps of the altar of the God of Peace he would be willing to kill Dubois and cut the heart out of him. De Vaudemont had sunk to his knees on the tile floor, obviously ashamed. Dubois strode on toward the altar, ignoring the girl, who screamed at the sight of him and shrank back into a shadowy corner.

"I was afraid that the arrangements might not have been completed," Dubois said with a leer at René. "When one is fighting a battle one cannot be too much concerned with little details of discipline such as the execution of spies.

"I ordered that they should bring her body here as soon as they had hanged her. I am a good deal of a humanitarian that way. Most husbands would have

let her hang there until she fell apart just for the good example of the thing."

René felt a chill come over him—then a sudden white rage. But he gave no sign.

"A woman spy?" he inquired in a tone that implied he had never heard of such a thing.

"But certainly," bawled the general with an air of mock politeness. "I thought you knew . . . She was kinswoman to your wife . . . Yvette de Souligny."

"Yvette de Souligny!"

"Ah, yes . . . I thought you'd appreciate the comedy of the thing. A charming girl, she was. But trying. And an awfully dangerous ornament in a house like this."

"And you hanged her?"

"Not personally—although I am free to admit that the etiquette of the situation seemed to demand personal attention. I can only plead necessity. I had to be with the men on the walls. So I entrusted the work to the executioner of Metz. Poor girl, it must have been hard on her to die without a sight of her husband. . . ."

"Her husband?"

"Certainly! That's what I said. Husband! Didn't you know she had a husband?"

"How should I know. If I ever saw her before it was only once or twice. I am really doubting that I was at all acquainted with the lady. And were you the husband?"

"This is the drollest situation imaginable, my duke. I was her husband . . . a bit of a supernumerary, I shall admit, but still her husband. And she tried to betray me—the slut . . ."

René did not trust himself to speak.

He knelt down beside the bier. But he did not see

it. Instead he seemed to envision the lovely face that had reflected the dancing firelight of the Hall of the Stag—the face that had cast its allurements over him only a few hours ago under the torches of his tent. Then softly he prayed that an understanding God might be kind to the glittering soul that had gone out.

"Have mercy on her, dear Lord," he petitioned. "If she lacked a little of approaching sainthood, remember that she was one of thy strangest creatures, Lord, a woman, and make allowance for her little sins. If she strayed from Thy Grace, so too have most of us poor sinners, and many of us have had better training than this poor child whom Thou gavest an angel's beauty, a man's heart, a woman's life, and consigned to the caresses of a beast.

"And as for him who killed her, give heed to him, O Lord. I shall volunteer to be Thy loyal servant, meting out justice as I know that Thou, the All Just would have it meted out. And do Thou, dear Lord, strengthen my right hand against Burgundy and its cutthroats who kill women. And give my soul the firm purpose to do Thy bidding, O Lord . . . Amen."

He would have remained there gazing at the white-draped bier had not Dubois interrupted his meditations. The general, far from showing annoyance, was well pleased with himself.

"We've wasted enough time at this rendezvous," he declared boisterously. "It is time that we looked upon the lovely lady's face. We probably shan't have another opportunity for this edifying inspection."

René rose stiffly from his knees.

"I don't think I care to look," he said tonelessly. "It is so easy to forget that one is in the house of God and under a truce with one's enemies."

Dubois seized the white pall. René swung about abruptly. He would have walked out when the girl who had cowered unnoticed in the shadow leaned forward and caught his arm.

"Don't go, my duke," she begged. "The Lord will answer your prayer. It is only fitting that you should witness the miracle which proves it."

And though he thought that grief had wrecked her mind, he allowed himself to be turned once more toward the bier. Dubois, still leering, jerked back the covering and the girl's hysterical laughter echoed through the old donjon from rampart to cellar.

The bier was empty save for three pillows embroidered with the arms of Burgundy.

"The devil!" shouted Dubois. "What's the meaning of this?"

"It means she got away," screamed the girl. "She tricked your hangman as she tricked you. And she is about eight hours on her way to Dijon."

"Well, now," guffawed René heartily. "It is a pleasant farce after all. You are a great impresario, Dubois. Your stagecraft is about on a par with your generalship."

"I'll kill Devilliers and Montjoie and the jailer and the guards and every man Jack who had anything to do with this," Dubois roared feelingly. "And the next time I'll hang her with my own hand, the dirty slut. . . ."

"There won't be any next time," mocked Yvette's sister. "She's been a good servant to Burgundy—better than you. And when she comes back it will be to point you out to a Burgundian ax man."

"And good luck to Burgundy," observed René. Dubois cursed and stamped out of the room. René followed De Vaudemont down the stairs and found the

count in the courtyard gazing up at the chapel windows. The pair moved in silence toward the gate through a lane of uplifted lances.

"When this truce is finished," René said at length, "I think I shall have to come back here and save Burgundy the trouble of killing Dubois."

"Help yourself," acquiesced De Vaudemont. "He isn't much of a general anyway."

And so seigneurs, the army of Lorraine turned back toward Nancy with René at the head humming a little song that his companion and enemy De Vaudemont had never heard before:

"Lady of Firelight many men follow you. . . ."

And the army made a brave sight in the morning sun although it was not quite so large as it had been on the northward march not so long before.

XIII

O YEZ, seigneurs, who shall say what sort of girl was La Pucelle, of Domremy? She was a slim, quiet little thing like one's own sister, pretty enough to look at but self-effacing and somewhat negligible. Yet she was not like the pale saints of the church windows. She was no ascetic. Her early life in a country village had been that of a normal country child and she carried the bloom of the outdoors in her cheeks and the vibrant energies of Youth in her beautiful body.

It would be exaggerating somewhat to say that the Château of Lorraine was unanimously taken with the gentle Jeanne. It is the privilege of any household to be suspicious of virgins sent by God, especially if

the messengers from on high are red-headed and good to look at.

There were Jeanne's legs for example. One could not but be conscious of them if one were a lady of the court compelled to wear the long skirts of the mode and constantly blushing at the display of an ankle. Jeanne wore the peasant's kirtle of the valley and seemed in no way aware that this rude garment ended shortly below the knee or shortly above it—depending on the strength of the wind. Such things were all right among commoners who were generally understood to have such things as calves and ankles and thighs—but to flaunt them in the corridors of the castle before the scandalized vision of courtiers who were theoretically in ignorance of locomotor anatomy—well obviously that was something else again.

And after her legs, there was the rest of her. In all the experience of the Duchess Margaret who had been on intimate terms with the saints these many years—in all her experience there had never come to her attention so physical a person speaking as one having authority from above. The girl's eyes were a scandal and her form undulating effectively beneath the close embrace of her scant bodice—was very little like that repeated endlessly in the stony images of ascetic damsels over the church doors.

She came to the door of the ducal palace accompanied by Jean de Metz and a retinue of louts. She was afoot and grimy with the dust of travel. A particularly dark smudge spread from the tip of her nose to her right eye and distracted the attention of those investigative souls who might have hoped to see a ring of light glowing from behind her tousled hair. The guards at the gate were not much impressed—but that is hardly remarkable, for they had not been

selected on account of their piety. One of them scoffed perceptibly when it was announced that Jeanne had come seeking an interview with the Duke Charles.

"I ain't sure he's in," he said. "In fact I guess he isn't."

"I'll wait," said Jeanne cheerfully. "I'll sit right down here on the steps until he gets back. I won't even bother to wash my face or fix up. He'll be glad when he gets back and sees how zealous I've been."

The guard looked with alarm at the smudged nose and the weird kirtle. He was no artist but it occurred to him that spectacle of this odd lady seated on the front steps of the castle might cause a bit of comment.

"I don't think I'd sit there," he told her.

"Now, don't worry about me at all," advised the girl. "I'll make myself perfectly comfortable and amuse myself by singing." The guard looked about helplessly.

"Stay here a minute," he said. "I'll go and look for the Duke." Jean de Metz grinned as he disappeared through the doorway.

"Do you always get your own way?" De Metz inquired of Jeanne.

"Oh, dear no," she said. "I very seldom get my own way in anything. Nobody ever takes me seriously."

"I feel sorry for you, my dear, but I think that this time luck is going to favor you. I really believe that this guard will get us an audience . . ."

However it turned out that he was wrong. The guard, marching truculently through the corridor toward the Hall of the Stag, encountered the Duchess Margaret. He bowed low and stood aside for her to pass. She stopped suddenly in front of him.

"What is all this row at the door?" she asked.

"A woman," he reported. "Says she wants to see the Duke."

"Young or old?"

"Young."

"Pretty?"

"Well—so-so— She has a smudge on her nose and her hair is carrot red. . . ." He paused to look into the eyes of the Duchess in helpless appeal . . . "I wish she'd go away," he said.

"Never mind the Duke," the Duchess told him. "I'll see this lady myself."

"You, my lady?"

"You understood me perfectly. It's time somebody took a little interest in looking at the huzzies that come into this house."

"A lot of people do," replied the guard—but this was under his breath.

And so it happened that it was Margaret who welcomed Jeanne to Nancy.

"Was there something you wanted?" she inquired coldly with barely a look at the messenger from Robert de Baudricourt.

"You look lovely, madame," replied Jeanne somewhat irrelevantly. "You are a saint of God or I never saw one."

Margaret had thought up several important things to say to a young snip of a thing with red hair and a smudged nose who would come boldly to one's front door and demand an audience with one's husband. But she did not say them. It was plain that there was more to this damsel than she had suspected. The girl was observant at any rate, and sincere . . .

"It wasn't to tell me that that you came here, was it my child?" Margaret asked at length.

"Oh, I had almost forgotten—" Jeanne's blush

gave a new contrast to the smudge on her nose. "I have been sent here by Heaven to see the Duke Charles."

Margaret looked stern once more.

"I can't imagine Heaven sending anyone to see the Duke Charles unless it might be the Dark Angel," she said. "His piety is not the most famous thing about him . . . Are you sure of the address?"

"Perfectly," declared Jeanne. "I got the name easily. Charles of Lorraine . . ."

"It is one of the most amazing things in all my life with Charles that none of the pretty wenches who come looking for him ever have the wrong address. His fame must be pretty wide-spread."

Jeanne gazed at her uncomprehendingly.

"Has Heaven sent other messengers ahead of me to see the Duke?" she queried tremulously.

"Emphatically not," the Duchess assured her. "Most of the pretty creatures came on their own initiative. There was one here day before yesterday who wasn't even pretty. But she seemed to get along pretty well. I sometimes think poor old Charles' eyes are failing."

"Do you mean to tell me that these abandoned creatures are throwing themselves before the noble Duke?"

"You get my meaning exactly. I am trying to emphasize the fact that I am getting tired of it."

"I certainly am shocked."

The Duchess peered at her sharply and was surprised to see that she actually was shocked. She was blushing—and that was something that few of the young women who visited the château were able to do.

"I can see now why Heaven sent me to visit the noble Duke," Jeanne said gravely. "It is plain that I am to warn him to mend his ways. If anybody but

you had told me I could not believe that he would quit the side of so sweet a lady to make scandal in the company of the little foolish ones."

"How long are you going to stay here?" inquired the Duchess. Her mind was struggling between the evidence of the girl's impassioned words and the contrary suggestion of her passionate eyes.

"I shall be on my way to-morrow if I am let," said Jeanne. "My mission here seems to be simple. I'll just tell the Duke how to behave, and then I'll borrow a horse and go fighting the Goddamns."

Margaret felt an inexplicable sense of relief and was immediately seized with the conviction that this girl was truly a creature of divine inspiration. How else could she have perceived so quickly and so accurately the Duke's need for warning and rebuke? How else could she have sensed the martyrdom—the patient, uncomplaining martyrdom of Margaret.

"The Duke will certainly see you my child," she said. "And he will give you aid or live to wish that he had. And I shall order him to send our son René to Touraine with you as a guide. A bit of spiritual influence won't do the boy a bit of harm and the silly little war with the English will take him out of more serious trouble at Metz."

However, Jeanne did not see the Duke that day. He was not to be found about the palace and it was rumored that he had last been seen wandering about with his arm across the neck of a one-legged soldier, the while he proclaimed to all and sundry that sermons in the home were seldom worth listening to. For two days the girl waited while the rebellious Charles remained far from the edifying influences of his own hearth engaged in pursuits that pleased him better. . . .

The château with all its grandeurs was a bit over-awing to Jeanne. It would have been that even without the aura of the Duchess Margaret. It was bigger than the church in Domremy and had a tower-guarded portico that suggested no enthusiastic welcome for strangers however Divine the message they brought.

But the drill yard inside the walls and back of the castle was a homelike place all cluttered up with animals and forges and armorers and crippled pensioners—all of which looked like a familiar section of any market place on the Meuse.

Jeanne spent most of her time in the yard. She was there on the afternoon when the Duke returned, and she waited there while De Metz went to smooth her way for an audience.

It was an interesting place. A one-eyed metal worker was pounding out what Jeanne took to be a shield. A sad-looking youth was pumping the leather bellows at the forge. Pieces of broken armor lay in dust piles in every corner.

"Who are you and what are you staring at?" snapped the hammer-wielding ancient as the girl stopped in the doorway.

"I am Jeanne," she said. "Why does everybody ask me that? And I am staring at you . . . All that brass reminded me that somebody ought to fix the leak in our copper kettle at home."

"What are you doing here, wench?"

"I came to see the Duke Charles."

The smith looked at her faded dress.

"I'll just bet he'll be tickled to death to see you."

"Do you really think so? I'm so glad." She lowered her voice confidentially. "You know all this is new to me. You'd hardly believe it but I never called on a duke before."

The armorer allowed his hammer to jingle a tune on the anvil and he seemed to be choking—probably on account of the smoke from the forge.

"I never should have suspected it," he declared with considerable emphasis. "You look as if you might be visiting dukes and duchesses every day. And what are you going to see him about?"

"I intend to have some words with him about the Goddamns in France. I think he ought to do something about it."

"Will you listen to that now." The armorer was talking to no one in particular, although his air of surprise brought a smile to the face of the cadaverous youth at the bellows. "Will you listen to that! She thinks the Duke ought to do something about the Goddamns in France."

"You seem to think that he couldn't do it if he wanted to."

"Well, there you have me, little one. Yes sir, there's where you have me. I suppose now that he could. I suppose that he could take this collection of louts that is now breaking its back in front of Metz and just chase over to the Loire and end the fight. Has he got any of these Scots archers? No! But why should he need any to fight the English. They have plenty. Has he got any bombards? Five or six old soup pots that ought to blow up any day now. But of course that wouldn't make any difference. And when was the army paid last? How long does morale hold up without pay? Has he got enough men to raise the siege of Orléans?"

"What's Orléans?" broke in Jeanne. At last the old man was talking about something she seemed to have heard of before.

"Orléans used to be a French town. Maybe it is

yet. But your English are all around it. They'll own it in another day or two."

"That's too bad. We've got to do something quicker than I had suspected. I don't suppose the Duke has heard about this. Has he men enough to do any good at Orléans?"

"He hasn't. A good enveloping attack is what the thing calls for—the kind of attack we put on when I was fighting in Piedmont. A jolly good attack it was but it took about 20,000 men."

"If I were doing it I wouldn't be bothered with so many men. Men are a good deal of a nuisance, don't you think?"

"Well, yes and no." He was controlling his anger at what seemed to be unregenerate heresy. "Yes and no. Men are almost useless in any army. It really is the horses that fight wars nowadays. I'll grant you that. But you have to have a few men to hang the armor on. I should imagine that a couple of squads of chain mail racks could turn the trick in France."

"I thought so myself. About a hundred Lorrainers would be worth a thousand of the soldiers that good Dauphin has had, Heaven bless him."

"Well, now you are talking sense. I've always said that the war would soon be over if they had more Lorrainers in it. All we'd have to do would be to show them a little of the stuff we put on every day at Toul and Pont à Mousson. You know, nothing fancy—just plain, honest soldiering. That's what the war needs—a few more soldiers and a few less generals." He banged the brass plate for emphasis at every word.

"I think you're charming," said Jeanne. "You must have been a great soldier in your day. You have such a lovely beard. . . ."

Jean de Metz appeared in the courtyard just then.

He beckoned to Jeanne, who turned away from the forge to run to him.

"What's the matter with old Henri?" he asked. "He seems to be a little crabbier than usual, if that were possible."

"I think he's perfectly sweet," replied Jeanne. "He agreed with me that something ought to be done about the situation in Touraine."

"If he did it's the first time he ever agreed with anybody about anything," commented the knight. "But what odds? The outer sentry has given us a pass into the château. Let's be going."

The Duke Charles looked at Jeanne through more kindly eyes than had the Duchess. He was not the man to overlook charm even in a peasant wench. . . . And heaven knew amusement was slight enough since René had marched out to Metz.

"So you think, my child, that you can lend a helping hand to the Dauphin."

"I know I can," replied Jeanne. "That's my Heaven-sent job. I intend to drive the English into their sea, which is somewhere the other side of Paris."

"That's a large order and I take it you haven't had much to do with armies in Domremy."

"Well, I know a little about them. Enough to do this bit of work anyway."

"It ought to take a lot of men."

"Yes, I know that's the general notion. But the kind of men they have in armies nowadays aren't much good. They're just racks to hang armor on. The horses do all the fighting."

The Duke looked at her sharply.

"You seem to be sure of yourself as a military critic."

It's a wonder you haven't been around here telling me how to run my army."

"Oh, I shouldn't think of such a thing. You do very well without any help. Have you any of these Scots archers? No! But you don't need any. Have you any bombards? Four or five old soup-pots that will blow up any day now. But what difference does that make?"

Duke Charles, whose watery old eyes were open to their widest could not find a reply.

"Of course," went on Jeanne, "we ought to have an army big enough to make an enveloping attack on these English. But a couple of squads of Lorrainers ought to be able to raise Orléans, if you know what I mean."

"Are you hoaxing me, girl? Are you making fun of a poor old man?"

"Of course not." Jeanne's anguish at the thought was patent. "I have just one simple mission—to drive the English out of France. I shouldn't have mentioned these things if you hadn't asked me."

"You talk like a guard house lawyer," observed the Duke. "But you're too young to know all these matters. You have all the confidence of a general. But you can't have had the experience of a general."

"What the Dauphin needs is more soldiers and fewer generals, doesn't he?" suggested Jeanne. "If only we could show them a little of the stuff that we do every now and then at Toul and Pont à Mousson—nothing fancy, mind you, just plain, honest soldiering. . . ."

The Duke raised both hands in a gesture of despair.

"You win," he said. "Take the army. Armies won't be much use any more with women romping around in them. . . ."

And so Jeanne stood at the side of the Duke Charles before the *Porte de la Craffe* when the troops rode into the city. In contrast to the armored bulk of Charles she seemed fragile—a child of Destiny, perhaps, but still a child—pathetically tiny for the work she stood ready to take up.

So it was that René first saw her. The sun was setting and there was a frosty light enveloping her. The young Duke never forgot her as he saw her then.

It was a cursing army that clattered up to the town—a balked army that had brought home a wealth of unexpended belligerence. The sight of the Duke and the pretty little mystic at the gate failed to calm the men, and the cheers of the admiring populace had no greater effect. They had come home penniless once more, without loot, without prospects for pay until the army quartermasters should have stumbled along through their endless accounts. And Nosey Pierre and Margot of the *Facile Tongue*, and the genial proprietor of the *Coq d'Or* might be a bit hesitant about extending further credit. So they cursed whole-heartedly as the women threw flowers in their path. They hooted as the old men of the town raised their cracked voices in a triumphal cheer.

But Jeanne did not hear the curses nor note the disgruntled demeanor of the returning heroes. She was looking for the first time in her life at an army, and the spectacle had lifted her out of the world. In her eyes the salvation of France was passing in review. These men of steel were her men by virtue of her mission. She was realizing what it would mean to be commander of such a legion. They were supermen, God's annointed, chosen through a special dispensation of Providence to ride at her bidding to a crusade.

The voice of the Duke aroused her.

"They appear a little like soldiers, these boys."

She looked up at him through fast flowing tears.

"They are beautiful soldiers," she said. "Beautiful!"

"Well," demurred the Duke. "I'd hardly go so far as to say that. René is a handsome chap and some of the arbalesters are fine-looking animals. But that hard-faced crab carrying the guidon and most of the chevaliers behind him are no ornament to our beautiful city. On the whole they are about one step ahead of the gargoyles in beauty—though I am ready to concede, my dear, that they are the best fighting men in the world."

"I could stand here for hours looking at them," replied Jeanne. "There is a halo of goodness about them."

And because she was so interested in the cavalcade, she did not notice the Duke's quick glance nor his smile as he turned away.

XIII

THE advance guard pounded over the drawbridge and into the Street of the Thievish Moor. Well up in the van came René, more serious of mien than might have been expected in a youthful victor. He exchanged a word or a smile now and then with the women who threw flowers to him and searched the doorsteps and balconies for a glimpse of his uncle and the maid who had wrought the strange anticlimax at Metz.

"I knew he would look like that," said Jeanne. "He is not unlike the Archangel Michael, although the Arch-

angel wears shining armor instead of black. However, I think that black becomes this young man's complexion. And he has a good heart. I can see that."

"Yes," agreed Charles, "accidental as it may seem in this day and age, he has a good heart."

"He will be a marshal and my chief of staff and . . ." Her voice trailed off the edge of audibility. . . . "And he will be a king and wear a golden crown on his head . . . But I shall be gone when that happens."

She moved away from the Duke's side and stood gazing at the column of dancing steel glinted with gold now that the low rays of the sun fell across it. She did not see René guide his horse out of the cavalcade and dismount. She was standing as one might stand in a trance when the knight of the black armor stepped through the crowd and stood in front of his illustrious father-in-law.

"Your orders have been carried out, sir," René reported. "Antoine de Vaudemont accepted my apologies for attacking Metz and allowed us to withdraw. He just left me on his way to Dijon."

"You have done well," commented the Duke, taking no notice of the youth's irony."

"Yes, I suppose so," replied René apathetically. "We captured Metz and, after all, it was good practice. The recollections of it will keep us in trim for our next wild expedition."

"You shouldn't take it to heart. There is a place for you in the world, René, and that place isn't going to be Metz when the armies of Europe are clashing on a battlefield in France."

René stood for a moment looking at Jeanne.

"And this, I suppose, is the poor little infant who is going to lead us out of the wilderness after able

butchers have spent nearly a hundred years getting us into it," he observed. "Bah! My dear father, can you imagine a lamb leading a flock of ravening wolves."

The Duke smiled and laid a hand on his arm.

"It isn't size or age that makes the leader," he said. "It is something inside that shines out of the eyes. Sometimes I have seen the fire in your eyes, René. But in this girl it is a continuous flame. And she is beautiful, my boy. Men will follow her."

"Men will follow her!" René repeated the words inaudibly. "Another Lady of the Firelight!"

"Well," he said after a long silence. "It's going to be more than the light in a beautiful woman's eyes that will make me recognize her as the savior of France. If she can swing a sword and ride a horse, well and good. I'll ride as far as she does and see how the matter turns out. . . . However, I'd like to talk with the lady." And for a second time the Duke aroused Jeanne from her day dreams.

The girl gave her hand to René without shyness. She smiled quickly and the color heightened in her lips.

"I had never hoped to see you, *Sieur Duke*," she told him. "I have been hearing of you as a brave blade and I hope you will be friendly to my cause."

"I shall be glad to be of service to you," said René.

She scrutinized him carefully and he wondered if he had buttoned his leather shirt beneath his armor.

"You do not believe me—yet—" she said. "But you will. You are to ride with me into France and with your help I shall put the crown on the head of the Dauphin at Rheims. Do you know where Rheims is?"

René's answering smile was natural enough. But he was uneasy. He felt as he had sometimes felt in

dreams when he saw himself parading naked through the streets of the city.

"You speak with assurance," he commented.

"I speak what I know to be true," she replied. "I could tell you much of yourself, my duke. It is no secret to me that you have been chasing the will-o'-the-wisp and you might as well be doing it in a good cause."

He looked at her sharply.

"You are a queer child," he said, "and something of a sorceress."

"Bah! I am a woman and I can see things. I can always tell when a man feels sorry for himself. You need a change of air and you are going to get it by riding to battle with me as God has directed."

René shook his head in puzzlement.

"Battles are quite different from the pictures one makes of them, my dear girl. You winced when the wounded were marching past a moment ago. Could you stand up stirrup to stirrup with death? You have never seen a man staggering comically with a grin on his face and his entrails in his hands on his way to hell, or the quivering flesh of a woman under a horse's hoofs, or girls like you dragged through the streets by the hair. War is an indelicate affair to say the least and it is a man's business."

"This war will be different."

"Every war is going to be different, but somehow they all turn out exactly alike."

"Few wars, *Sieur le Duc*, have been fought for the high motives that will govern this one."

"You are more certain of that than I am. Men will resent your interference. For centuries the army has been man's only refuge from women. And naturally he won't know where to turn if he is to be hounded all

the way to a battlefield. The good old warriors may not share your enthusiasm."

Jeanne's eyes widened.

"But there will be no danger of precedent," she assured him. "There will be no women in the next war because there isn't going to be any next war. This crusade will end war for all time. My voices are not definite on that point but I know it must be so."

Rene smiled at her eager confidence.

"What makes you foresee such a humdrum future for the human race?" he asked.

"This is a good world, *Sieur le Duc*. I have seen much of people since leaving my father's house and I find that folks generally are not nearly so bad as I had been led to believe. Everybody treats me with kindness. Men seem quite ready to follow me. It seems to me that with everybody in the world trying to do right a Divine Providence will end the scourges that are sent to punish wickedness."

René looked at her sharply. He was amazed to discover that she seemed entirely sincere . . . A pious world! Dijon and Hesdin and Chinon and Paris—Sodom and Gomorrah and Nineveh and Babylon! Burgundy with its comical harems. Lorraine with its tragedy of sham piety! France and its regent, queen of promiscuity—a splendid concourse of saints indeed. At every field corner a gallows, on every gallows a felon's corpse—in every byway a cutpurse with a stained poignard, in every shadow a whisper of sin. And this was the good world that little Jeanne of Domremy had set out to save from the oppression of the ungodly. René's ready laughter failed him. It was with difficulty that he restrained his tears.

"Don't you think you could do better if you were to go home and pray for the relief of France instead

of taking this journey in person?" he asked. "Surely divine influence could accomplish all the results you forecast without dragging you through a war."

"God helps them who help themselves," said Jeanne. If you will go with me to the Dauphin it will save time and some lives. If you will not I must go by myself."

"I shall go with you," René replied. "After all it's my sister's throne that you are trying to save."

Jeanne smiled once more.

"I knew you would say that," she answered impulsively. "And I don't know what I'd have done if you had said no. You see I don't know how to get to Touraine. I can be brave when I talk but I seem to be always needing encouragement. I guess I really am a coward."

But René had looked into her eyes and he knew the truth. Jeanne might run from a mouse and weep at the sight of blood but she would be cold to battle as she would be cold to love.

"Do you know," he observed confidentially, "I shouldn't wonder if you should beat the English after all. We'll start to-morrow and see about it."

They turned toward the château, leaving the Duke to his self-appointed task of reviewing the tail of the column. And as they walked the fading sun warmed Jeanne's cheeks and made her a vivid picture against the frosty background of the ancient buildings. The Lady of the Firelight was alive once more.

René wondered what there could be in this girl to stir a man who had known the most beautiful women in Europe. Her magnetism was undeniable, but it was a charm quite apart from her lambent eyes and red lips and the svelte, youthful grace of her.

Unbidden the old, old formula passed through Rene's mind:

"She is very beautiful, this child. Beautiful and mysterious. And there is magic in her eyes. . . ."

As if he had shouted his thoughts aloud Jeanne suddenly turned on him. The flame in her eyes had become as cold as the glint of moonlight on ice-covered marble. For a moment she looked at him and her mood was gone as quickly as it had come.

"I almost misjudged you, *Sieur le Duc*," she said. "I thought you were about to say something foolish."

"You have an uncanny perception," replied René. "And you probably know that if I didn't say something foolish it was not for any lack of intention. But if you can read me that easily you must be aware also that you are as safe with me as if you were in God's pocket."

"Yes," she said. "I guessed that. If we're going to fight a war I should imagine we'd better keep our minds on that."

"That's a bargain," agreed René. "But what I had intended to say is true anyway."

They were talking of such intimate matters as the care of horses when they came at last to the *Grande Porte*.

.

René did not linger long in the Hall of the Stag. There were ghosts in it—the ghost of an able swordsman who had been overconfident, the doleful phantom of a sentry who had been knifed from behind, and the more lovely but no less intangible wraith of a woman who should have been dead and was not. The young Duke shuddered before the cold hearth and strode upstairs to pay his respects to his wife. To his surprise he found her in tears.

"I had hoped you wouldn't pay any attention to father's message," she told him petulantly. "I didn't want you to come back."

"It's candid of you to say so," he assured her. "The chances for my staying there were excellent but somehow I never did make the best of my opportunities for being killed."

And she wept more violently.

"I didn't mean that . . . You know I didn't. But I'd rather have you dead than starting off to-morrow on this new fool's errand."

René looked at her for a moment speechless.

"Just what do you mean?" he asked when he had found his tongue. "You don't show any excitement when I go through the motions of capturing Metz but you behave like a baby when I offer my sword to France. It isn't exactly logical."

"Don't you tell me it isn't logical. It's one thing to think of you riding over the hills with a lot of butchering rogues and another to know that you are out gallivanting with a moonstruck girl who'd better be home with her mother. I've told you before that I don't want you running around with women."

"But, my dear, this girl is only a child and your mother herself believes she is divinely inspired."

"She may have divine inspiration but you haven't. And anyway I hate her."

"Quite possibly you do. You have entertained such sentiments you know at odd times. Do women ever really care for other women?"

"I hate women. Women are selfish and deceitful and dishonest and disloyal and certain to make trouble at every opportunity. That's why I'm trying to keep you out of the clutches of this one. You're not

going to Chinon with the little ninny if the English take all of France. So there."

René bowed gravely as she stamped her foot.

"I should like to have some time with you this evening," he said. "I must get a bite to eat and after that I shall have many things to tell you."

"I don't care to hear them. I don't intend to be talked into consenting to your outrageous conduct and if you ever gave a thought to anybody but yourself you'd be respecting my wishes instead of arguing."

Years of marriage had made René a domestic diplomat. He said nothing.

"I'm going to bed now," she told him. "And I don't intend to be disturbed. I shall pray that God may send some sense to this angel-faced little fool who wishes to wear men's clothes and be a soldier."

In departing she first gave him a dutiful, wifely peck on the cheek and then suddenly kissed him with trembling passion. For, after all, Isabelle of Lorraine was a woman and not so much different from other women.

That night came Raoul with a protest.

"What's this I hear about our traipsing all across France with this ambitious and beautiful yokel?" he demanded.

"It's true as gospel," stated René for the sake of argument. "Jeanne is going to take a short vacation from her sheltered life in Domremy and whip the English. As for me, I have always felt myself to hold a divine commission of a similar sort with reference to the Burgundians."

"Well," admitted Raoul, "that is what I call a logical expedition. I was a bit afraid when we were breaking through the last of the defenses at Metz that you

had become prosaic and unimaginative enough to fight wars as other folks fight them. But this shows that you have not succumbed to temptation. This ought to be about as disastrous an enterprise as one would wish.

"Think of the novelty of riding into ambush because a seventeen year old girl from some yap town on the upper Meuse has day dreams and believes in fairies. The world will thrill to the tale of it if we don't get our throats cut by the unimaginative Burgundians before we have a chance to dignify the thing with the outward appearance of a battle. Everything is ripe for it. The horses are all spavined and the men are all sick and disgusted. I think there will be a fine mutiny before morning. And if there isn't, about half the command will be dead drunk or full of dysentery."

"Do you really think it is that hopeful?"

"More so. If it weren't for the fact that I err on the side of conservatism I could tell you lovely stories about your so-called army."

"Then I am truly sorry," commented René with feeling. "Because the army isn't going to make the trip. To tell you the truth I hadn't intended to make it myself but you and my wife are so insistent that I can't conveniently stay home. I think I shall try to make out with a guard of twenty five or thirty men. The rest of the troops will be concentrated here to keep the peace or die of the plague until King Charles sees fit to recognize this girl and take the field or surrender definitely to the English."

"Under such circumstances I guess it won't be long until we are back at Metz," replied Raoul. "Charles has been defeated for years and he won't listen to the voice of God. Why he wouldn't even listen to La Hire. And as for his taking the military advice of this baby I think you may be a bit disappointed. He

hasn't your intelligence and so he won't appreciate the dramatic possibilities of the thing. I shall be pleasantly surprised if the lot of you aren't assassinated."

"Your buoyant optimism is all that keeps you from being a keen judge of human nature, Raoul. And you can never get much good out of an adventure because you are habitually seeing the happy ending. However, if you should care to accompany me on this jaunt just on the bare possibility that we may be able to scare up some excitement, I should be pleased to have your hilarious company."

"Oh, I had intended to come all along," said Raoul. "I have just returned from an interesting conversation with my wife."

XIV

AND so, seigneurs, they rode out of Nancy in the early morning, René and Raoul and Jean de Metz and the girl Jeanne Darc and an escort of thirty cavaliers. Straight across the lands of Burgundy they rode, unmindful of danger. For there was need for haste.

And the farther they rode the more René marveled at this little girl—littler than ever in the boy's clothes she had adopted for the march—who had undertaken to drive a mighty army out of France where it had been rooted by a hundred years of success.

He felt old—patriarchal—as he listened to her enthusiastic comment and marveled at her inexhaustible energy. He would have lengthened the rest periods on her account. Instead he was forced to shorten them. It was only grudgingly that she consented to the briefest delays consistent with the welfare of the

horses. So long as the animals were fit for the road she was in the saddle.

"We must go on," she told René when she awakened him before dawn on the morning of the second day. "We must go on. There will be delays enough when we reach the King. He knows how to make them."

And so they went on at an amazing speed while Raoul held his tongue and René wondered at the pains in his back. Hardened campaigner that he was he often felt the sting of fatigue as they covered the long miles from Nancy over the hills by the headwaters of the Meuse. But the girl sat straight in her saddle all day and sang gay little chansons of home when the fires were lighted at night.

There was a mechanism of nervous springs in her, he thought. And the rest of her was all spirit, an unearthly energy quite independent of the lithe body that housed it. She was more than another Lady of the Firelight. She was fire itself.

They rode by forced marches detouring slightly southward to avoid Dijon, but always conscious of the danger that lurked in a region where every hamlet might be a mobilization point for mercenaries.

And as they rode René talked hour on hour with this mild-eyed maid who had undertaken to undo the hundred years' work of a painstaking nation.

"Just how do you intend to go about rescuing the Dauphin?" he inquired.

"Oh, there will be no difficulty about that," she answered. "I shall rescue him and drive out the hated English and see him crowned king."

"Commendable plan as I have said but a bit indefinite as to strategy."

"What is that?" queried Jeanne Darc.

"Well, let us call it a method of action."

"There is no use planning here in the Burgundian woods how a thing is to be done on the road to Paris. God wouldn't have sent me on this work if He hadn't intended I should win. Would He now?"

"No, admitting the premise, it seems that one has to admit the conclusion. So that leaves only the very minor consideration of admitting the premise."

"Oh, I shall be glad when it is over, my René. These iron things hurt my legs."

"A saint of God has no legs or at least she shouldn't mention them casually like that."

"But I have René . . . That's what I said. These iron things have bruised me black and blue. And my arms are so sore I don't think I shall ever be able to knit again."

"You might try weaving or tatting. When I look at most of the knitting that is done around Nancy I certainly feel sorry for the sheep that went to so much trouble raising the wool."

"I never was much of a knitter anyway." Jeanne made the admission with a sigh of resignation. "I did all the things my mother wanted me to do around the house and I suppose that some day I'll go back to housekeeping although, honestly, I didn't like it much."

"I should think that housekeeping would have points on wandering all over Burgundy dodging arrows and what not in company with an assortment of louts such as our companions . . . So few young girls can appreciate the joyous freedom of campaigning."

"I didn't think a great deal of the campaigning part of it. My voices told me to do that. So I did as I was told. But if my voices hadn't been telling me all

the time to go to war and if my mother hadn't been always telling me to get married, I think I might have had a very nice time sitting under the fairy tree and listening to the music."

René started with sudden interest.

"That sounds like a very nice program," he admitted. "What is this fairy tree?"

"It's just a tree. It stands near my father's house in Domremy and the fairies play around it . . . I can't say that I have ever seen them, you understand, but on a still summer afternoon when the shadows run down the hillside into the valley and the little silver threads of the veil of the virgin are spinning out into the sunlight you can just feel that they're all around you . . . But you're a soldier and I suppose you will think all that sounds pretty silly."

"No," said René soberly. "I think I understand you. I should be the last one in the world to deny that there are fairies or enchanted princesses."

"When we are all through defeating the English we'll come back through my town and I'll show you the tree. You can sit out there by yourself and hear the fairies. And you will hear them if you just keep quiet and believe hard enough. And you'll be sure to hear the music anyway."

"Fairy music?"

"No, not exactly. It's my own private orchestra. There are chirping things that play their little haut-boys. I have never seen them any more than the fairies, and their music isn't very grand. But they put a lot of zeal into it. And the bees and the wind in the pine trees play a sort of an organ and there is a woodpecker that does real well at sounding the drums." She hung her head a bit and smiled. René laughed enthusiastically.

"Is that all you do with your time?" he asked. "Have you prepared yourself to lead troops in the field by listening to crickets and woodpeckers?"

"In Domremy there aren't so many things to do," she answered. "It's a nice little town and all that, and when I have chased the hated English out of France I intend to see that something is done for it. But it isn't very big, if you know what I mean."

"I know a lot of towns like that."

"Not like Domremy. There aren't many towns like that. We have had plenty of fun there. Days I have helped my mother or looked after the sheep. In the evening I have sat at our doorstep and listened to Uncle Pierre tell of how John the Blind rode to death at Cr cy—or was it Agincourt? And he has told me of the wonders of great cities like Toul and Bar le Duc. Many a night I have kept myself awake thinking of the wonders of the world just over our hill. But I was really very contented where I was.

"All I ever wanted was to be let alone so that I could sit under the fairy tree and sing little songs to myself. But no one would let me. First Monseigneur the Cur  told me that it was a pagan thing to loiter there with the fairies. Then my mother wanted me to marry a farmer's son and have a home of my own and I didn't want to marry him. And finally my voices told me to go into the world and take charge of a war . . . and I can't say that I wanted to do that either . . ."

Ren  made no comment. But his eyes were wide and his lips tight together. The story of the little girl who had wished nothing in life but to sit under a fairy tree and sing her own little songs was not so much different from that of a boy who had wished to do the same thing.

"Ho hum," sighed Jeanne prettily. "I am just a useless little girl. I never could get anybody to do anything I wanted done."

And René's eyes widened still farther.

"Did your parents wish you to come on this journey?" he asked.

"No. They tried every trick they knew to keep me at home. Can you imagine that? But I knew what I ought to do. So I went anyway. I got my old uncle to come along with me to Vaucouleurs and you know the rest . . ."

"Did my Uncle Charles the Duke run right out with an escort and force you to move into France?"

"No, I had to convince him. He didn't want me to come. But when I told him prettily what the situation was he was very kind to me."

"So that's how it was. Well, Jeanne, my dear, for a child who never had her own way in anything it seems that you have done pretty well on this expedition."

"This is all very different," said Jeanne with finality. "There is another Me that is going to be a general and put Charles the Dauphin on the throne of France. But the Me that I really think I am is the one that wants to sit under the little tree and sing. For a moment, my René, I thought you understood that . . ."

"I do," replied René gravely. "I always wanted to be a music maker myself, but no one thought much of my talent. . . . Jeanne, have you ever seen faces in the fire?"

"Yes," admitted Jeanne looking up at him suddenly. "How did you know that? I have seen many things in the firelight. But sometimes, my René I wonder if they are in the firelight at all—or only in my eyes."

"I frequently have wondered that myself," replied the Duke René.

.

He realized one morning that he loved this girl as he had never loved a woman before. And he found nothing remarkable in that. It would have been strange if she had not aroused a response in a nature such as his. But it came to his consciousness with much surprise that he felt no pang at the knowledge that she was forever unattainable. He found no answer to this paradox as he followed her on and on over the dim road to the destiny of her choosing.

.

They were four nights out from Nancy when they ran afoul of the Burgundians. There was no novelty in that, for all the continent was spiny with lances. Fortune had favored them that they had not been compelled to fight for their lives even before they crossed the frontier out of Lorraine.

The escort had tumbled from its horses exhausted, to sleep like dead men without interest even in food. So René found them when he came back from a brief reconnoitering trip along the trail through the woods ahead. And he abandoned all thought of posting a guard, well aware that the guard probably would be unconscious an hour after he had been sent to his station.

"You had better get your sleep, too, Jeanne," he advised La Pucelle. "I shall sit up and keep watch until midnight. By that time one of the men may be rested enough to relieve me."

"I am glad that you are to be the guard, René," Jeanne commented sleepily. "For there will be trouble before morning."

René piled up leaves to make a bed for her and

laid his cloak over her as she fell asleep. For hours in the dim moonlight he sat watching her—and marveling at her.

She had said that there would be trouble before morning. He had not questioned her. He had not so much as given a sign that he had heard her. But for all that, he believed there would be trouble before morning. Trouble, it seemed, had a way of following Jeanne Darc. And this demure creature in the absurd boiler plate that had been made to deck the person of a man a size and a half larger had a way of sensing her dangers.

René was aroused from his revery when an arrow grazed his cheek and hurried footsteps cracked in the brushwood on the edge of the moonlit clearing.

He called to the sleeping escort, drew his sword and dashed into the woods. His last impression of the awakening camp was that Jeanne Darc had opened one eye, stretched herself, and was now rolling over to another hollow in the leaves to continue her sleep.

It was well along toward daybreak when the weary guards came back from beating the brush. Jeanne was sleepily stirring the fire under the porridge pot.

"Well, we were attacked," René reported. "And they got away."

"Yes," said Jeanne. "I knew that."

"You were asleep when I left here," remarked René pointedly.

"That's why I know," she answered simply. "One of their horses walked on me and that woke me up. There were two of them."

René stared at her in sudden fright.

"Why didn't you call?" he demanded. "If you had fallen into the hands of the Burgundians we'd have had a pretty job."

Jeanne rubbed her eyes and seemed unusually contrite.

"I am so sorry," she said. "I had no intention of falling into the hands of the Burgundians, my René. But I forgot that you would have no way of knowing about it and if I had called to you that would have frightened them off. . . ."

René slapped a mailed fist against his steeled thigh in a gesture of despair.

"My dear child," he asked her, "was there any object in keeping them?"

"Well, you see how it was. When I found that the poor horses had come loose from their tether, I thought I ought to tie them up as near as possible to the place where they had been picketed. So I drew them back into the woods to a place where they had trampled down the brush and I tied them so they wouldn't come loose accidentally again. And after a while the Burgundians came along and found them. I was standing behind a tree so close that I could have touched them."

René opened his mouth but he could not find words to say anything. Even in the half light of the dawn he thought he could see the cynical eyes of Raoul laughing at him.

"Oh, there was one thing I wanted to ask you," Jeanne went on. "Just for the joke of the thing I tied a loop of horsehair around the right hind hock of each horse. It is a trick that François the Farrier taught to my brother. The horses will walk lame before they have gone two miles and the riders will have trouble getting anywhere on them. But I am wondering if it will hurt the poor horses."

René looked at her closely. But there was no mirth in Jeanne's eyes as she continued to stir the fire.

.

The days were clear and fairly warm, though a bit bracing where the highway led for hours at a time through dense forests. The nights were frosty and the ground cold and hard. The halts for meals were infrequent and the marches long. The men of the escort were free with their criticism. Jeanne, who bore the hardships of the journey without complaint, showed that she was an amateur commander by taking these complaints seriously.

"I am tired of this cursing," she told René.

"I shouldn't object to it if I were you," he advised. "A good round oath is the outward expression of morale. A soldier is always within discipline so long as he has energy enough to talk about his troubles."

From the rear of the column came a mumble of discontent.

"I swear by the seventeen cross-eyed whatchecallits of Lausanne that this army business is getting worse every day!" This from a hoarse voiced arbalester. "It was bad enough when we had a lot of old women with beards chasing us around. Now we have Susies like this one who doesn't know a harquebus from a crupper telling us how to march and how to fight. This is the last time I ever enlist for a job like this. I have my opinion of Janes who go wandering around making wars . . ."

Jeanne swung her horse about suddenly and spurred him to a gallop. She drew rein beside the unfortunate critic in a cyclonic maneuver that took René's breath.

"Listen to me, blockheads," she began in the picturesque but forceful Lorraine French. "You've cracked the last of these jokes I'm going to listen to. Me, I'm running this thing. Get that. When the day comes when you can ride faster or farther than I can

or go longer without food and water I'll give my job to you. Until then I'll do all the weeping for the expedition."

"Go to hell," suggested the arbalester.

A second later he was soaring over his horse's ears into the road and Jeanne was screaming with convincing concern for his welfare.

"Oh, René, come quickly," she called. "I was so careless. While I was talking with this man I must have tickled his horse's belly with my spur. It must have been accidental because the horse pitched this poor man off into the road and maybe he has been badly jarred."

"What was he doing when he got pitched?" asked René who did not seem to be entirely convinced that the horse might have been tickled in a sensitive spot so opportunely by accident.

"He was swearing," said Jeanne with pretty hesitation. "Maybe this was in punishment for his swearing."

"I dare say it was," agreed René as he called upon others of the escort to assist the bruised arbalester to his feet. "I am beginning to see that swearing is a very reprehensible habit."

The soldiery looked at Jeanne in amazement. But after that, for some unexplained reason, there was no more swearing—at least there was none within ear-shot of Jeanne Darc.

They crossed the Côte d'Or and came presently to the Loire. Perhaps not all their hearts were as full of zeal as that of Jeanne Darc. But their mouths were just as full of dust and their bruised bones ached in their iron housings.

"I am glad that this journey is nearly over," René

confided to the Maid as he rode along at her side.

"So am I," admitted Jeanne. "But it has been an interesting experience. When we have taken Charles the Good and Sagacious and placed him on a throne in Paris to administer justice and kindness to his oppressed people we may be glad that we have made this sacrifice."

René studied the girl as he had been studying her repeatedly since the incident of the horses. But she seemed to be so many things that she obviously was not.

"Do your voices tell you all these things about my brother Charles of France?" he inquired.

"Well, no," admitted Jeanne. "Not exactly. That is to say, my voices tell me that he is a good deal of a nincompoop but I like to think that he may turn out differently when he is given back his kingdom."

"Your voices bear an unassailable mark of authenticity," declared René. "I am beginning to believe that you have the divine guidance after all. . . ."

XV

NINETY flambeaux lighted the great audience chamber at Chinon. Half a hundred men at arms in highly polished armor stood with uplifted lances against the fluttering arras, scintillant, imposing, magnificent. Men in velvet and women in brocade ranged before the massive pillars. And a tinsel king sat on a tinsel throne and surveyed his mock court with the bored air of a greater Charlemagne.

It was blazing with color, this court. The barbaric glitter of torch and steel made a background for purple

satin, diaphanous veiling, iridescent feathers, and scarlet cassocks. Beautiful faces detached themselves from the merging tints. Stately, graceful figures moved on to bow before the king.

Youth still flamed in the hardened visages of some of the cavaliers. Strong hands still rested on sword hilts beneath lace cuffs. Wide eyes showed that there were some to whom this spectacle was not old and meaningless, that to some of this concourse the king was still a king and the daily cotillion still to be classed as a regal rite.

But for the most part the sham of the pageant was quite evident. The gold thread had long since tarnished in more than one of the clinging gowns. Here was a patched doublet, there a pair of sleeves out at the elbows. If the feathers and veilings and ribbons were colorful it was with the soft fading tints of age. And the men and women who passed in review before the Dauphin did so with the air of marionettes answering the pull of wires, painfully conscious of duty and not a little mindful of the fact that there was food to be had at Chinon and that subsistence elsewhere might be something of a problem. The gayety of the assemblage was that of mummers playing for their supper. For this was at once the most hilarious and the most lugubrious court in Christendom.

The guards stood rigid. The courtiers came forward to make their obeisance with all the solemnity of acolytes at high mass. Charles the Dauphin, rightful heir to the throne of France, accepted his honors with becoming pomposity. He looked every inch a king who would shortly look every inch an exile. His kingdom, of course, could have been larger. Everyone was willing to concede that. But his manner could have been no more grand had he been ruling from a

throne in Paris instead of here in a grim castle on the edge of the English advance.

To-day, however, the Dauphin was a bit tired of the play. It was becoming more and more difficult to forget the war and its seemingly inevitable consequences. A few days ago the loyalist troops had been defeated in the comical battle of the Herrings. At this very hour the English were besieging Orléans and to-morrow or next day the Burgundian raiders would be sweeping through the valley of the Loire to end the shame of France with sword and torch.

And the cause of all this? The quaint maternal instincts of Charles' mother, Isabelle of Bavaria, who had married her daughter Catherine to Henry, the butcher of Agincourt, and disinherited her son. A little English prince was to be recognized as king of France. And after that the court of Chinon could disband and find amusement and free food in other quarters. Charles did not relish the prospect.

He glanced with some irritation at Marie of Anjou, his queen. He had no quarrel with her as a wife. During the years of their turbulent marriage she had been completely effaced, content to live her life as a mother rather than a queen, mentally her husband's echo. There had been solace in the companionship of Marie during a time when solace was sorely needed. And yet as he looked over the tatterdemalion patchwork of his retinue, the Dauphin wondered what might have happened had he allied himself with Burgundy instead of Anjou.

Charles barely knew the mother who had sold his crown to England. Yolande of Aragon had mothered him, and René and John and Marie and little Yolande had been brothers and sisters to him in the long gone years at Black Angers.

It was a pleasant dream, the sunlit garden in the castle yard at Angers—almost unbelievable. The backwash of civil war in Paris had not reached there. He had been happy—and that was what made the dream so unreal . . . Happy! Charles had almost forgotten the meaning of the word . . . He might have married a princess of Burgundy and ended the feud with his Dijon cousins. He might have avoided his ghastly retreat from the poverty of Bourges to the poverty of Chinon. But he had been happy and he had not questioned the decision of Yolande of Aragon when she chose him as a husband for her daughter.

A bit of a climax from a *chanson de geste* was that romance—and its consequences were Greek tragedy. The marriage with the house of Burgundy was waiting only the word of a priest when the Duke of Orléans had been removed by the none too subtle poignards of Jean Sans Peur. Yolande, efficient, and ambitious and not without a certain selfish interest in the affair, took it upon herself to send the prospective bride back to Dijon.

"Charles is to me as my own son," was her message. "He cannot ally himself with the daughter of a murderer." And of that high-spirited ultimatum had come this, the greatest and most terrible campaign of the Hundred Years' War.

Burgundy was with England and against Anjou and Armagnac and Orléans and the royal line of Valois, not because of any love for England but because of an insult to the Burgundian house. Marie of Anjou was titular queen of France and the world was a welter. Charles wondered what Yolande had gained by her skillful coup.

Ho hum! It was a dull business, this pompous show. There was Margaret of Blois, for instance, re-

splendently strutting forward in a blue gown. Charles felt that there could never have been a day in his life when he had not seen that blue gown. Behind her was the haughty Helene of Bourges whose shredding bodice was beginning to be a tax on modesty. In the near distance was Dunois, the Bastard of Orléans, pale, proud and impeccable, and close by him the hard, weather-beaten face of La Hire, the most merciless guerilla and the stanchest loyalist in what remained of France. The Dauphin could not see La Hire's equipment but he knew in advance that it would be battered and worn as the man himself. La Hire had no time to waste in grooming for ceremonials . . .

So the audience went on without incident, without interest. Then came a commotion at the wide doors and a herald dashed in to throw himself at the King's feet.

"René d'Anjou, Duke of Bar, is at the gate," he announced. "He comes by forced marches from Nancy . . ." And a spontaneous cheer greeted the message—a cheer followed by a vibrant echo and whispers that betokened a thrilled expectancy. René was a popular prince, hence the cheer. He had no particular business this close to a lost cause—hence the thrill.

"Thank God for an able soldier," prayed the King.

"The bravest blade in France," boomed La Hire.

"At last a man," murmured the lady of Blois smoothing down her tatters.

"My son!" cried Yolande of Aragon, and the proud lines of her mouth softened and tears flowed from her half-closed eyes.

Jeanne did not enter the court with René. The young Duke gave her into the charge of his mother's waiting women and strode into the audience chamber and the presence of the Dauphin.

Charles greeted him with a regal equivalent of affection.

"I am pleased that you have come, brother," he said, "although this is a trying time for all of us. We have very few amusements and the food is not too plentiful. I believe I should be better off in the hands of the English. You won't be happy here. We have to economize on the wine and I haven't seen a smile in two weeks."

"I'm not interested in that," said René. "I have something to say to you if you can contrive to dismiss this picturesque mob and give me a word with more or less privacy."

"We can step into the antechamber," agreed Charles. "La Tremouille will accompany us. I have no secrets from him."

René looked coldly at the cadaverous knight who stood within easy listening distance of the throne.

"I shouldn't imagine that anyone else has many secrets from La Tremouille," he observed. "He has that investigative look. However, I don't suppose that makes much difference. . . ."

The Dauphin gave the signal and the ornate guards formed a lane from the dais to the nail-studded door at the left of the throne. The courtiers stood in silence while the trio passed out.

Charles seated himself in a high-backed chair and attempted to conceal his interest in René's message.

"Sire," said René without wasting any time on preliminaries, "I have just brought you what may be a bit of help."

The King started in spite of himself.

"Arms?"

"No . . . you have arms enough hereabouts if you would only make use of them. I came here as an es-

cort for a girl—Jeanne is her name. She has a whimsical notion that she can push the English far enough to let you get to Rheims and take the crown of France.”

The King sighed and settled back in his chair. Tremouille laughed aloud.

“Did you come all the way from Nancy to crack jokes?” demanded Charles irritably.

“That would be a bit of presumption amounting to insolence, considering the competition,” said René. “This girl says she has a message that may interest you. She is an uncanny creature with powers she ascribes to a divine commission.”

“Well,” commented Charles, “that certainly is an odd conceit.”

“It is, isn’t it?” agreed René sweetly. “I took a look at your court as I came in and I think you are right in your implication that God wouldn’t have a great deal to do with it.”

“Why should Lorraine be singled out for a special dispensation of Grace?” queried Charles with some logic.

“It is preposterous,” put in La Tremouille. “Doesn’t the King hold his authority from Heaven? Wouldn’t it seem more sensible that an All-Wise Providence should choose him as a messenger rather than a girl from the hinterlands of the Meuse?”

“Of course,” agreed the Dauphin with becoming modesty, “I am quite sure that I should be better fitted for such a task. And I have had more experience in warfare.”

“Maybe it’s because your experience makes you a bit overcautious,” replied René with no hint of the animus that his words implied. “And I seem to remember that Judith did pretty well as an instrument of the Lord.”

"That's neither here nor there," declared La Tremouille. "I know that if I were running the thing, I should select a man already invested with divine authority to do the saving of France instead of trusting so large a task to an inexperienced hussy. And surely God is as wise as La Tremouille."

"Really decent of you to say so anyway," said René. "But we are wasting a lot of time in this purely ethical discussion. The girl is in Chinon and she wishes an audience with the Dauphin. As her emissary I'm asking that she gets it."

"I'm not so sure that I wish to see her," stated Charles petulantly. "This war has tired me dreadfully, René. I have fought it according to all the rules but I just don't seem to have any luck. At Cravant I led the troops in person and had everything going my way. And then the English got reinforcements, and circumstances over which I had no control ruined my chances. It has always been that way. Whenever I fight I lose some more territory. I am almost convinced that a program of passive resistance is the only thing that will give us the upper hand over the cursed English and their unspeakable allies."

"That would be a dignified procedure, no doubt," answered René gravely. "But do you think that the cursed English and the unspeakable Burgundians would be able to understand so high-minded an attitude?"

"Not the Burgundians at any rate," conceded the Dauphin. "But so long as we don't fight we invoke no reprisals. No, René, I don't think I shall see this friend of yours. If the English keep on as they have started I am going to be pretty busy moving. And for the next day or two I am going to have a lot of conferences about a new taxing system. Funds are my chief worry. You'd be surprised. Jacques Cœur came

to see me the other day with a plan for putting more silver in the gold coins and more copper in the silver coins. It sounds reasonable and far more profitable than war. So I don't see how I shall have a chance to see this girl. I really don't . . . unless she is extraordinarily pretty."

La Tremouille nodded his head sagely.

"War is a distressing business," he said. "It takes two to make a quarrel and usually three to make peace. If we conduct ourselves wisely we probably can get more out of a truce than if we were to keep annoying the English and Burgundians with war. I think your majesty does quite right in refusing to see this crazy woman."

A look in René's eyes brough La Tremouille's conversation to a sudden close. The Dauphin took up the thread of it with the air of a philosopher expounding a new and startling thesis.

"We shall get better treatment if we do not press the enemy too hard," he said. "And I think I am doing quite right in refusing to bother myself with this girl who is either crazy or a witch."

René spread his long legs apart and looked at the Dauphin with an enigmatic smile.

"But you are going to see this girl," he said. "You are going to hear her story and give her a chance to make an offer."

Charles gripped the arms of his chair and raised his weak chin in a caricature of hauteur.

"You are speaking to your king," he declared.

"You have a rare and ready wit, sire," replied René. "Just what would you describe as your domain? A few acres of ground and a courtful of nincompoops like our friend on your left. Charles, you and I have no need for secrets. My Duchy of Bar is about as big as your

whole kingdom and I can raise three soldiers to your one. And if I have to prove my loyalty to you by throwing you into the river, don't think for a minute that I'd hesitate to do it."

Charles shrank into his cushions.

"Don't bully me, René," he whimpered. "I have a lot of trouble."

"I can forecast that you're going to have a lot more," said René.

La Tremouille straightened his shoulders belligerently but he made no move toward his sword hilt.

"This is an outrage, your majesty," he declared. "The Prince is disloyal and merits death for his treason."

"As for you," remarked René cheerfully, "I should be bound by none of the instincts of loyalty that govern in the case of my brother here. I could perform a tonsilectomy on you with a dull sword and feel I had done a good day's work." And without further words he marched to the door of the audience chamber and threw it wide.

"A message from his majesty," he called. "Pass the word: The Gentil Dauphin will receive Jeanne Darc, La Pucelle, of Lorraine!"

The heralds took up the cry. . . .

XVI

INTO the glare of the long, cold chamber stepped Jeanne, the Maid, alone. Her friends at court had stopped outside at the order of the King. Now over the silence that had greeted her entry could be heard the indignant protests of Yolande of Aragon and Queen Marie. Out of all the group who had dared to plead her cause, only René was present to witness the

reception and he was there only by virtue of a sharp tongue and a well-advertised sword. Stopped with the others at the grande porte, he had come by devious paths to the anteroom. He forced his way into the throng just as the girl, bewildered, hesitant, came forward through the broad double doors.

René cast a quick eye over the assemblage and felt a sudden dizziness. On the throne sat La Tremouille, insolent, confident. And the crowd of colorful parasites had parted to place him squarely in line with Jeanne's vision.

It was a picture, had René's artistic eye been able to appreciate it: The courtiers and courtezans shrinking into the darkness behind the flambeaux, the golden haze weaving through the smoke . . . the flaming plate of the guards. . . . The floor of the hall was a clear stretch of black tile and in the center of it stood little Jeanne, a slim wraith, more eerie than ever in the unsteady light that played over her close-fitting garments of black and white.

René felt an impulse to kill Tremouille. He would certainly have made a sign of the hoax had opportunity offered, but the press of the crowd blocked his path and Jeanne looked neither to right nor left but straight at the throne and at the grinning sycophant who aped the King.

It was a tense moment. The men and women who had come to laugh at the discomfiture of this nobody from Lorraine, found little to amuse them in her appearance. The ethereal spirit of her, the air of innocence, the indescribable atmosphere of virginity so out of place in this regal brothel disconcerted the women who might have jeered. For, as it has always been since Phryne mocked her judges and Aphrodite ruled in Alexandria, each of these women was two persons:

the courtesan she was and the maiden she had been and sometimes pretended still to be. Each of these soiled creatures saw in Jeanne a picture of herself and so found it more convenient to weep than to jeer.

Slowly Jeanne walked toward the throne. The silence of the place came and went like the beating of a great heart. So still was the hall that her light footsteps were caught up by the echoing vaults in half-heard whispers. Her breathing, quick but regular, was audible even to René in the corner behind her. Suddenly she stopped and there wasn't a heart in the assemblage but skipped a beat. She stared at Tremouille, her lips parted, her hands clasped in front of her.

"You are not the Dauphin," she declared in a ringing voice. A woman sighed and swooned but no one noticed her. The throng, from the hired guards to the Dauphin himself, stood rigid with excitement. The girl, no longer bewildered, turned slowly about and surveyed the forms crowding back into the shadows.

Then with quick decision she darted toward a black-garbed man who seemed to be merged with the gloom under the middle arch. She dropped to her knees, and the ninety flambeaux in the hands of the ninety stolid fighting men trembled. René would have shouted his thanks to God but his throat was dry and closed. . . .

Jeanne had found the Dauphin.

XVII

YOU have heard, seigneurs, of how Jeanne Darc, the red-headed peasant maid from Lorraine, took command of the troops of France and directed Xaintrailles, La Hire, and the Bastard of Orléans in the grand sweep northward that uprooted the English

and hurled them back toward the sea. She had come to perform a miracle. She performed it. But perhaps you have heard also, seigneurs, that this was not done without some delay.

In the first place, the theologians had to be convinced that her orders to put Charles the Dauphin on the throne of France had come from God and not from the Devil. One can never be too careful about such things.

So they examined Jeanne in philosophy, ethics, and other essentials of military leadership. And that took a long time, during which the English went to great pains to entrench themselves at Orléans.

It was necessary also to prove that she was a virgin. Just why this was so, seigneurs, the authorities did not make evident. But it was necessary. One might suspect that La Hire and Xaintrailles might not have passed so rigid a test, but on the other hand nobody thought of putting them to it. Perhaps had the Dauphin seen to this simple examination years before, he might not have been driven into a rat hole in Chinon.

Having proved her authority, her virginity, and her purity of motive, Jeanne was led one day into the presence of La Hire and her King and told that she might now lead the murderous Armagnacs into battle—and would she please be quick about it, for funds were getting low in Chinon.

"Where is the army?" inquired Jeanne.

"Out somewhere in the hills," replied La Hire. "The boys got tired of going without rations so they are doing a little foraging."

"Well, we can't wait for them," decided Miss Darc. "It's their fault if they go running around looking for food when there is a glorious campaign like this to be

made. Let's be going. I have to be home for the fall harvest. . . .

"René! René! Get me my sword. . . ."

.

What need to tell you, seigneurs, of the march on Orléans, La Pucelle's first step on her journey to her pyre at Rouen. The world knows these things. The world weeps for little Jeanne and never loses interest in her marvelous adventure, although by now it has become an old story. You have heard your grandfathers tell of how her generals betrayed her and refused an attack on the English bastiles about the beleaguered city and how she opened a bridgehead in a bitter fight to bring up the troops that their obstinacy had placed on the wrong side of the river. It is common gossip now how the Armagnacs, chastened and superbly confident, swept down on the besieging forces and swarmed over their redoubts, and how not even the bravery of Lord Talbot could stay the panic of the once invincible English.

Jeanne relieved Orléans. She took northward with her a vast wave of soldiery and drove the routed English and Burgundians back along the road of ashes that they themselves had made. Almost without battle, almost without bloodshed, she escorted the Dauphin Charles to Rheims and there stood by to see him crowned with the crown of Charlemagne. From that moment France was free.

And after all, seigneurs, you know how she was betrayed by the Burgundians, tried at Rouen by French ecclesiastics, and burned at the stake by the English. Charles, then King of France in fact as well as in name, was too busy at his many odd little pursuits to help her and too hard pressed for money to attempt her ransom. That is history, my dear seigneurs, a drama of glorious

achievement and ghastly tragedy. The writers of it waste no time with pretty sentiment and poetic justice. They write with swords and a sword has no particular morality nor sense of perspective.

.

Jeanne took active command of her army for the first time as it moved out of Chinon. She sat at the head of the long column astride her white horse, a small angel in gleaming garments. She was encased in a suit of silver armor damascened in gold, a gift from Yolande of Aragon. The lithe youth of her was evident even in the unyielding curves of her gear, but only a straggling curl that refused to stay pent under her helmet betrayed her sex. A white banner, her own gonfalon of the lilies, hung from the standard of the guidon. White satin trappings draped the steel accoutrements of her horse.

At her side rode René, a somber figure in his black armor, black gauntlets on his lean hands, black plumes on his casque, black chain, unadorned with the usual vanities of silk and ribbons, protecting the barrel of his mount.

The pair were a contrast in demeanor as well as in equipment. Jeanne as slight as the smallest page who rode with the troops, René towering over her, tall, broad and strong, as fine a figure of a man as could be found in all the mass of veterans who thronged the road; Jeanne, emotionally uplifted, René, as sober as his own trappings, no longer the cynical poet, but a warrior riding out once more into the mists of the dawn to bid Death an insolent good morning.

Before her on the white road, Jeanne saw the salvation of France, the accomplishment of her mission. But René saw only Jeanne, heard only her voice, felt only the throbbing influence of her presence. She was

so close to him that at times her stirrup touched his knee, so close that at times the fragrance of her hair seemed overpowering. And yet she might have been in Cathay for all that his heart could speak to her.

Even had there been no Isabelle of Lorraine sitting at home in Nancy, Jeanne still was Jeanne who rode apart from the world. She was not only unattainable now. She had always been unattainable. René, the happy troubadour, shaken to his soul by an emotion as devouring as it was without precedent, dared not hint of love in word or action. Jeanne, consumed by her own destiny was a creature of star dust. She would not have understood.

At the end of the road would be a battle and perhaps a merciful sword thrust. René could not hope for more. He rode on and on in silence.

In the first excitement of the march, Jeanne did not notice his moodiness. After all her waiting she could hardly believe that thousands of men moved at her word, that an army was actually surging against the enemies of France because these men had faith in her. For many a mile she rode half turned in her saddle that she might better see the flashing pageant as it crested the hills and poured its quivering iron down into the sunlit valleys.

Near Azay le Rideau she faced forward to find René sitting on his horse, his face set as if in pain.

"What is the matter, René?" she asked with quick solicitude. "If you are not well, we can halt here for the day."

"There is nothing the matter, Jeanne," he told her. "Maybe I am a little tired. I was up late last night conferring with La Tremouille and the King."

"I had hoped you would feel glad that France is to be saved. You do feel glad, don't you, René?"

"Of course I do, child, why shouldn't I feel glad?"

"But it is not like you to be silent. One should sing on such a morning as this. I'd sing myself if I could keep my mind on it."

"I am thinking of the fighting you will have to do. Out of habit I refrain from singing on the way to battle. You get dust in your throat."

"You should think of the victory—not of the fighting."

René murmured something that sounded like "To hell with the victory." But it was obvious that he could not have uttered so impious a thought and Jeanne did not question him.

"It will be a glorious victory," she went on. "I don't suppose that in all the history of the world there has been so holy a war as this one . . . Except maybe the crusades. Look at all these brave boys behind us. Why do you suppose they are so willing to fight?"

"Don't you know?"

"Of course I know, René. The glory of God! That's what they are going to fight for."

He shook his head and smiled oddly.

"You don't suppose, do you, that the prospects for loot ever lured an Armagnac into battle?"

Just for a moment there was white anger in her eyes. Then she laughed.

"You are just fooling me, my Duke. And for a moment I thought you were serious. These men of ours are good men—always good at heart whatever they have been. And I really don't believe they are thinking of loot."

"Nor I," said René quickly. "I know why I am here and certainly I shouldn't criticize the motives of anyone else."

"You have followed the command of God," she murmured.

"I have followed a beautiful vision," he corrected her. "So have we all of us."

René could not understand his own emotions. Any attempt at self-analysis found him confronting a stranger.

Love! The old René had laughed at it as he had laughed at woman who was its natural exponent. Not that he had failed to thrill to moonlight and perfumes and the witchery of pretty faces. His life had been a cycle of such things—things that sometimes amused, sometimes bored him—philanderings that he undertook from purely investigative motives. He had scoffed at himself as he improvised his chansons of true and undying affection and he had showed his skepticism in the mockery of music to which he set them.

Love! The delusion of women who could cloak with a vaporous and mystical garb the yearnings of sex . . . The excuse of the less poetical male for his predatory expeditions. The favored buncombe of the minstrel depending for his bread and butter upon the whims of amorous ladies. The "love that comes once to every man" he had known purely as a ludicrous phrase.

"The matches made in heaven" of which troubadours were so ready to prate, could have no meaning to him who from childhood had been married to Isabelle of Lorraine.

He had been a man's man, patronizing toward women, kindly toward men, chaste through choice, conscious of the superior intelligence that protected him against the obvious maneuvers of an Yvette de

Souligny. He had met women's tricks with a formula of his own: deft flattery, whimsical reproof, a song, a sigh and a vibrant voice. And he had laughed at them hurriedly so that he might have his laughing done before they laughed at him.

Now all this was changed. He rode in the excitement of war with ten thousand men. And yet he was unaccountably lonesome. It puzzled him that he should feel so keenly the loss of something that he had never possessed. The old time René would have laughed at such a thing. The old time René would have been too proud to recognize interest in such a paradox. René who had never dared to admit to himself the possibility of defeat now had surrendered to a force that he could not understand.

There was a physical reaction. His breath came with difficulty. His eyes burned and the steel weight on his shoulders seemed about to crush him. He felt an almost uncontrollable urge to ride on, and on—away from everyone—away from himself. . . .

What would the end of this be? What could be the end? He smiled bitterly at his luck as the forecast of old Boson echoed in his memory: "Women will cause you a lot of trouble."

He had been strong. He had held himself master of his emotions. And now that weakness had come upon him he was in love with a goddess of the air who in turn was crying aloud for the moon. There was a fine lunacy in that, something excruciatingly funny if one had the humor to appreciate it.

.

Jeanne Darc slept on the field that night in her armor. But René, after he had lain down beside her, could not sleep. He arose and all night long as he

paced the white road, he wondered why the chill air of the valley should feel so hot on his cheek.

XVIII

ORLÉANS!

René carried away vague memories of the battle that broke the English grip on France—memories of incident rather than heroic ensemble. His swordsmanship, his insane zeal in the fighting at the north bastille made him a hero over even those twins of jeopardy La Hire and Xaintrailles. But he barely recalled the broken casques and the split armor that had been strewn in his wake. Orléans was not a battle to René. It was Jeanne Darc.

In eight months the English had built formidable works about the square walls, works fringed with fine, painstaking ruin. Culverins, bombards and serpentines exchanged stony greetings from well constructed fortresses on both sides. The air was atingle with noise and gunpowder. Gauzes of thin smoke which Jeanne likened to the gossamer "veil of the Virgin" of Lorraine drifted over the town. La Pucelle was delighted. Here was war that made itself evident to the senses. It promised reward for her tedious wait at Chinon and Tours. She clapped her hands joyously whenever the cannon laughed.

Jeanne had planned to strike Orléans along the north bank of the Loire, cutting through the principal strong points of the besiegers. The captains had demurred and Jeanne had declined to listen to their advice.

"The English are on the north bank," she said. "How are you going to fight them if you march on the south bank?"

"It is a fine piece of stupidity to attack an enemy where he is prepared," declared Louis de Laneuville.

"It is much harder to attack an enemy where there isn't any enemy," countered Jeanne. "I don't know much about wars but I never heard of two armies making much of a battle by sending letters to each other."

"The girl is right," interrupted René. "The English won't be looking for an attack where they are prepared."

But the Armagnac leaders had their own opinions.

"The English have had that position for nearly a year," contributed the Count d'Armagnac. "What sort of a chance will we have rushing hell bent into their camp. It is simple strategy to keep the river between us and the enemy."

"I can understand that," said Jeanne as she drummed the pommel of her saddle with her mailed hand. "You have had more experience than I have had in keeping away from the English. After all putting a river between you and them is more bold than separating yourself from them by the whole of France as you have been trying to do."

La Hire laughed. And when La Hire laughed so did De Xaintrailles.

"You'll do for me, girl," La Hire declared gruffly. "You are a better soldier right now than any dozen of these retreat experts."

"I concur in that sentiment," echoed De Xaintrailles.

Jeanne was still looking pityingly at her rebellious aides.

"We attack on the north bank," she said with an air of finality. "You may not think so. But you will."

She turned cheerily away from the conference and rode to Orléans where she and her escort were met by

Dunois and taken to the south gate of the city by boat.

This was foremost among the pictures in René's mind—Jeanne in the moment of her first triumph, the idolized heroine of the beleaguered city. Women and children, who wept with joy and sang foolish songs, scattered flowers and bits of gay ribbon in her path. Warriors fought for a chance to look at her. The garrison which yesterday had been ready to surrender, now howled for a chance to do battle. And all the town was in the streets and most of it insane.

The troops came up on the wrong side of the river. The stubborn captains found themselves blocked by a fortress at the bridge. The English greeted them with a barrage of arrows and a noisy salute of culverins.

"Now, here's a pretty mess," announced D'Armgnac. "Who put that fort here?"

"I'd be the last man to tell you," replied De Laneuville. "It wasn't here when I was fighting in this neighborhood a year ago."

"These English don't fight like any normal human beings would fight. We can't attack them where they aren't prepared if they are prepared where they oughtn't to be. If you know what I mean."

"I guess we'd better go home and wait till the war catches up with us at Chinon. I always did believe that it takes less effort to fight a war of defense than one of attack, and this girl is impossible."

"We'd never hear the end of it if we gave in to her."

"The men are tired. They will be glad to go back to barracks and wait for a more opportune moment."

But there they were shown how faulty human judg-

ment may be, however evident the premises. As they watched, the banner of Jeanne la Pucelle broke out over the tower by the bridge gate and before a withdrawal could be ordered the men had seen it. There was a fine row.

"Orléans," roared the gentleman in the front rank. "Let's get into Orléans. The Maid is there and the wine is plentiful. Let's have D'Armagnac into the river!"

"There seems to be a lack of discipline in this mob," commented D'Armagnac. "Perhaps it would be better for the present to seem to compromise."

And so in the end they marched back to Blois, crossed the river, and came eastward at a heartbreaking pace.

On the night of her arrival in the city Jeanne was taken to the treasurer's house close by the west gate, René, who had become accustomed to sleeping on his feet or not at all, gave his horse into the care of a page and seated himself on the doorsill. Presently it began to rain. The fires of the English, red against the sky, were the only sign of battle. The few troopers who had accompanied Jeanne were asleep and peaceable in their billets. There were none of the usual women in the streets. The inns were dark. The guards, whatever might have been their opinion of La Pucelle's discipline, were glad to know that they might pace the wooden platforms on top of the walls without fear of having to defend their lives against friendly and drunken soldiery. The Loire, black and silent, flowed on with scarcely a ripple, giving no hint that it carried a cargo of dead men down to the sea.

The rain beat a noisy tattoo on roof and flags and dripped unheeded down René's neck. The thunder split into a million echoes in the hills. Then more

ominous than the din of the storm a bombard crashed. Within a minute came other sounds, the clangor of metals, the splintering of wood, and the cries of men for whom the dark had opened to let them look into the face of death.

René leaped to his feet. Flaming arrows were falling into the town with a whispering like the frou frou of a pelisson. Doors were opening. As René peered into the blackness a triangle of light spilled from the kitchen of a house across the street and rose like a fan on the opposite wall. Soldiers were astir, but sleepily. Neither they nor René could comprehend what had happened.

And then came a voice, wide awake, clear, vibrant:

"My arms! Give me my arms! Frenchmen are dying!"

Jeanne Darc, swift and silent even in her weighty armor, came flying across the stone flags of the court and out into the street where trumpeters were already sounding the attack. A pursuivant came forward with La Pucelle's white horse. Automatically René took his place at the stirrup. He lifted the girl into her saddle and then vaulted into his own and followed her in a mad charge down the old Roman road toward the Burgundy gate.

Jeanne did not need to be told what was going on. With that uncanny perception that René could never explain, she sensed not only the whereabouts of the fighting but its cause and result.

Five minutes ago she had been asleep. Now she was on her horse and riding like a veteran into her first battle. The citizenry, the garrison, and the few warriors of the advance guard had attacked the bastille of Saint Loup without waiting for advice and now the troops were streaming back toward Orléans with death

in their wake. The more fleet-footed of the retreating mob were at the Burgundy gate when Jeanne passed through it with René, La Hire, De Xaintrailles, and De Metz close behind her.

The first of the soldiers to see this vision stopped short and looked foolish, like sleepwalkers suddenly awakened. For the first time it occurred to them that they had been retreating from the English and the Burgundians and that under the new dispensation they were not required to do any such thing. They felt ashamed, not at the retreat—for retreats were something of a habit with them—but at having displayed initiative in making it without orders.

An instant later Jeanne's battle cry shattered the turmoil rolling like a bell note across plain and river:

"Amys! Amys! Ayez bon courage! Sus! Sus! Ils sont tous nostres!"

Then the stragglers in the road got out of her way, for she was bearing down at a gallop on the men massed before the bastille. She was standing in her stirrups, her helmet hanging on her shoulder, her hair streaming back in the wind—an angel of wrath. The defeated troops as one man turned about. They followed her. The pursuing enemy halted, then fell back. In a moment the Armagnacs were sweeping over the bastille, a tidal wave of flesh that seemed to have neither fear nor feeling, only momentum.

The defenders of St. Loup, unable to identify in these returning fiends the sheep who a few minutes before had been fleeing their own shadows, crossed themselves with a prayer for protection against the Devil.

A terrorized cry echoed along the parapets:

"The witch is here. God help us now!"

These fearless Britons, one with the stock that had

taken the terrible fields of Crécy and Agincourt, wept like children afraid of the dark and fled in a panic before the onslaught. The bastille was taken in one short bloody hour.

René was silent as he rode back to Orléans with La Pucelle. There was a pain in his heart that seemed different from the throbbing ache of the past few days and yet not so different. It was not until hours later that he found the ragged wound of a lance thrust in his breast.

"That should have killed you," observed Raoul de Montfort in the hall of the treasurer's house. "Somebody evidently got through a joint in your cuirasse . . . Skilled workman . . . Did a good job . . . Who was he?"

"I don't know," said René. "I can't remember getting wounded."

The army came back on the side of the river where the English were and attacked. They knew nothing could stop them, for now they had confidence in the justice of their cause; it was so manifest that they were in the right. As for the English they dug their toes into their trenches and held on. They felt that they could not be dislodged, for they too had confidence in the justice of their cause, and it was patent that they, too, were in the right.

There was a day when René forgot his promise to La Pucelle and cursed France, the Armagnacs, their blundering leaders and all the other obstructionists whose jealous bickerings had threatened the loss of the campaign.

He cursed with the vigor and energy of a temper loosed after long restraint. De Xaintrailles and La

Hire looked at him in frank admiration and commented freely on the scope of his vocabulary. But La Pucelle did not hear. She was unconscious in his arms and blood was flowing from an arrow wound in her shoulder.

"If Jeanne Darc dies a lot of you oiseaux will be on your way to hell before her funeral," he assured them. "If she had three small boys and a dog she could get along without the pack of you. Soldiers! Generals! Yokels with no guts! A million of you wouldn't make an army. You eat men's rations and let this girl get wounded. I think I shall enjoy the job of taking you off the payroll one by one or two by two!"

And then René sat for two days without sleep before Jeanne's door waiting to see whether his next assignment of butchery would take him against the detestable English and Burgundians or the still more detestable Armagnacs.

But La Pucelle recovered, and more than one captain was pleased to hear about it. All France knew of the sword that hung from René's saddle. No one doubted the Duke's willingness in mortuary pursuits. And they likewise were agreed that he was just a little insane. They attributed his faithful watch over Jeanne to the influence of Queen Yolande, who had sponsored the girl, or to the whimsical temperament that made him do things differently from everyone else. René who never explained anything anyway did not make any comment when the echoes of these theories reached him. To-day's gossip would be accepted as to-morrow's fact—and well enough.

The Maid got out of bed on the fifth day. She clambered back into her saddle and renewed the attack. The Armagnacs crashed through the last of the English defenses and it was a routed army that fled

in terror along the roads to the North. But René never remembered much about that.

XIX

AND so they stood at last before the altar at Rheims in a flood of golden light while a crimson cardinal placed the crown of France on the head of Charles the Dauphin. It was a throbbing moment. It was as if the voice of God had echoed through the great nave when the Bishop of Rheims raised up the new King and forecast his continuing greatness.

"This seems to me to be a pledge of peace," he had said. And none of that radiant throng would have ventured to doubt it. Peace! Little Jeanne raised her eyes and clutched the staff of her white banner the tighter. Peace! She seemed to be listening to a message from her angelic voices. If they did not speak it was not that she failed to sense what they would have said. She was sure of it. There was to be no more war. There could be no more war. And this grand old cathedral would stand as a monument not only to St. Remy but to the faith of the Maid at whose instance this great miracle had been wrought . . . Not one present but knew that soldiers were kneeling in this church for the last time, that the sword was about to vanish from the face of the earth.

Charles took the girl by the hand and thanked her publicly. But she heard him no more than she did René who stood at her elbow.

"I owe everything to God and to His chosen messenger who is called La Pucelle," the King said. "And the King does not forget. I pledge you, my people,

that I shall be a good king in so far as God gives me guidance, and before Heaven I pledge myself to do what I can to repay the enormous debt that I have contracted toward all of you. I would pay what I owe, although the debt is beyond payment. May I never fail in humility and kindness."

The King said this and more while René whispered, unheard, to Jeanne in the twilight of the sanctuary.

"Kings have short memories," he told her. "That is why they are able to make such beautiful promises.

It is divine compensation. Charles is human. I know him as a brother. Make him give you a written guaranty of assistance when you need it, and immediate compensation for your troops. Don't be deceived by fine words in the mouths of kings—especially newly made and ancestral kings."

"Jeanne Darc," said Charles. "There is not a reward in this kingdom great enough for you. But we shall be pleased to do for you what can be done. Whatever you will shall be done. You have only to speak. . . ."

She looked at him for a moment transfigured. Then she answered with her ready smile.

"I have done only God's work," she replied. "I cannot ask a reward for that. But, gracious King, I ask a boon for my people. I should like to have you remit the taxes of Domremy forever . . . Is that asking too much?"

For a moment Charles looked almost noble.

"They are remitted," he assured her. "That is a solemn promise. And now?"

"My work is done, my King. Dismiss me and let me go back to my father's house."

The cathedral became so silent that one could hear

the sputtering of the candles on the high altar, and the asthmatic breathing of the bishop.

"It is my turn to ask a boon," said the King. "If you wish to go not a hand in my kingdom will dare to stop you. But you are needed here. The English are still in Paris. The Burgundians are still pillaging in the North."

"You can drive them out yourself if you put yourself to it," she replied. "If you move forward as if you meant it, all France is yours. You do not need me."

"I beg of you to stay, Jeanne." There was a tremor in his voice and unusual moisture in his watery eyes. "I shall ask it on my knees if that will influence you."

"You are my king," she answered in a soft voice. "I do as you command. I pray God it may be for the best . . ."

They passed out of the cathedral. The town and the hills about were covered with soldiery—soldiery awaiting only a word of command to start along the white road toward Paris. René could not but feel the great calm of the Temple of God in the shadow of war. It troubled him to think that perhaps never again would so great a concourse of men stand in these roads, that the chant of the monks would be forever unbroken by the clashing of arms and the braying of cannon, and that life would be less amusing, albeit a little longer. Where would one find solace in loneliness if he were denied the sword and saddle?

His reverie was broken by a knight on a black horse who rode through the ranks of the Armagnacs and dismounted stiffly before the cathedral porch. With

a deep bow to the King, he turned suddenly to René and presented a scroll.

"This letter will confirm the tidings that I bring, my duke," he said. "Charles of Lorraine is dying. It is his wish that you return to Nancy."

It would be difficult to say who received the news with the greatest consternation, René, the King, or La Pucelle. The girl, who was already in her saddle, dismounted precipitately and pressed closer to the stranger.

"The Duke Charles is dying?" she repeated.

"It is true, Jeanne," said René who was glancing at the scroll. "He was ill when we came away. He writes that he will go gladly now that he has seen the liberation of France . . ."

"And you must go, René?" Her voice was tremulous.

"That is for you to say, Pucelle. If Charles is dying there is certain to be trouble ahead for me in Lorraine—more trouble than heretofore, which is saying a great deal. If you are able to assure me that he will recover or that it is better for me to go with you into France, I shall go."

She shook her head.

"You had better go back to Nancy," she said in a tone scarcely louder than a whisper. She was looking at him through half closed eyes that seemed,—as indeed they had always seemed—to be directed at something beyond the misty hills. "As I told King Charles, my mission is at an end. No one can help me further—not even you. France is won if the King will put out his hand to take it . . ."

"That ought to make my going a little easier," he replied. "But it doesn't. You have won a war, Jeanne, and you have given Charles a kingdom, but

before agreeing that the work is done, I'd like to see what he intends to do with France, now that he has it. Your campaign is over, but your troubles aren't. I don't need any heavenly inspiration to tell you that. Why do you stay?"

"The King has asked it . . . And my duty is to the King, and to Queen Yolande. I admit that I should be better off if I could get out of all this and go back to Domremy. I shall open the road to Paris. . . . And Charles . . . will . . ."

She hesitated.

"I understand," said René. "It would be something of a task even for angelic voices to forecast what Charles is going to do."

"At any rate," she replied in a matter-of-fact tone. "I don't believe I shall ever see Paris. I feel I should be going back to Lorraine with you. Back to my mother. . . ."

The army waited while Jeanne talked with René. Knights held a tight rein on impatient horses. Archers leaned on their cross-bows and spoke frankly of their annoyance at the delay. The shifting masses in the road made eddying blends of green and brown and silver between La Pucelle and the gay portico of the cathedral. Clouds drooped in veils between the laceries of flying buttresses. And Rheims was like a gaudy tapestry with Jeanne in the center of it.

Even the King stood by patiently attending La Pucelle's order to march. But Jeanne had detached herself from her surroundings. She was troubled. René's summons had stirred many things in her mind . . . memories of the fairy tree of Domremy, her father's house and the bold colors of the Meuse valley . . . memories of men who had died at Orléans . . . visions of a hill-town by the brackish tides of a distant

sea. . . . And a pyre burning in a public square. . . .

Jeanne Darc was even then on her way to death. At that very moment old women were cutting faggots in the hedgegrows of Rouen—faggots that in a year would be piled high for the cremation of a girl whose only crime had been a belief in her King. . . .

"No," she said, "I am quite certain I shall never see Paris. There will be more fighting and I shall do my best and eventually the English will be driven into the sea. But I shall not see that day. . . . I shall pray for the Duke Charles, he was kind to me. And I shall pray for you, too, my René. And you will be a king."

"Thank you, Pucelle, I shall probably need many a prayer."

"Good-by, my brother. . . ."

"Good-by, little Jeanne . . ."

René's voice was hoarse. There were tears in Jeanne's eyes. But René did not misinterpret her emotion. Jeanne had one passion—France. In a way René had been part of herself—always at her side—always and unquestionably her friend. She would miss him. He took what consolation he could out of that—a paradoxical consolation for one who shuddered at what might be in store for her.

The girl turned quickly that he might not see her tears. She motioned quietly to her generals. Commands snapped along the weaving column. The mass of men stirred as a unit—like a great steel-scaled Tarasque aroused from sleep. Crashes of metal merged suddenly in an inspiring rhythm. The army was in motion once more—on its way to Paris. Jeanne's white pennon fluttered at the head of it beside the royal guidon of the King she had made.

René saw her face like a ghost through the mists

that obscured his eyes. Then he swung to his saddle, barked an order to his little escort, and clattered out of Rheims on the road to Chalons. His last view of the town was the sublime profile of the cathedral like the finger of God against the blue—the newly dedicated monument to eternal peace.

René's touch on the reins was mechanical. The road led through vineyards and forests and hillside towns, but he looked at these things without seeing. The horse guided himself and René, paying no attention to the knights who rode with him, tried to think.

Why, to get down to elementals, was he going back to Nancy? An old man was dying. A Duchy would presently be in dispute. René wondered whether the filial devotion that was bringing him across France did not merit a better reward than a heritage of woe.

Isabelle would be waiting to meet him . . . in her own room probably. She would be dressed in black velvet with a cap of pearls over her glowing hair. René had no difficulty envisioning the room with its black hangings and chaste silver appointments—perfect setting for a blonde with a sense of her own pictorial value. And she would assume the attitude that René knew so well—unequivocal modesty and uncomplaining (but not too uncomplaining) martyrdom. She would have something unkind to say about La Pucelle. And when he should tell her that France was driving the Britons back to their foggy island she would accept the fact without interest or emotion. In other words, Isabelle would be Isabelle.

And the children—René's heart took a leap. He rather liked the children . . . Jean and Marguerite and little Marie. He didn't know them very well but they weren't bad kids. He hoped to get better ac-

quainted with them while waiting for the next war. He would probably find that they had been suffering at the hands of meretricious tutors intent upon modeling them after the namby-pamby ideals of Isabelle and her mother. And he would protest and there would be a fine row.

Why should he go back to all this? What was to prevent his riding over the hills to the south, a free lance with a free conscience? A sword such as his would not go long unhired and he need never again hear the eternally patient voice of Isabelle recounting his manifest deficiencies. There must be some place in the world where a good lute player could sit down and twang his lute without having to get up somewhere before the *da capo al fine* and clamber aboard a war horse. Surely a position could be found in some court for a practicing poet. Why must a man who wished only to be let alone find himself continually beset by other folks' quarrels over things that he cared nothing about?

René the warrior had had enough of fighting. It would be nice to sit by a cool river and make songs about an abstraction called Love. Heartaches might seem less poignant if one could wander across a poppy-strewn field herding a lot of silly sheep and piping to them like *What's-his-name* in Anacreon's lyrics.

In a year, no doubt, he could make himself the most famous minstrel in France—perhaps the most famous portrait painter and the most famous gallant. But ho hum, there were other things to be considered besides inclination and talent. His mother, gentle meddler in other people's affairs, might be displeased if he failed to show proper appreciation for the mess in which she had placed him. The children, too, were

entitled to some consideration. The baby had smiled at him when he saw her a year ago. . . .

There was also the code of blood. A noble was not exactly a free agent. He owed something to his caste—something to himself. A poor cavalier might go gallivanting over the landscape as he pleased, vassal only to those from whom he might accept food and lodging. But for a duke to shirk responsibility merely because he might have preferred hell to his dukedom was not at all ethical.

There was the final consideration that he had passed his word to Isabelle of Lorraine . . . to have and to hold, to love and to cherish, in sickness and in health, . . . for better or for worse . . . till death do us part. . . .

The picture of the scented gardens, the poppy fields, and the singing rivers faded into the dust of the Chalons road . . . He would go back to Isabelle as he knew he had intended to do all along.



THE Duke Charles was not expected to live through the night when René unbuckled his gear for the first time in months and hung it on its accustomed hook in the Hall of the Stag. He was in a delirium, shouting continually that the Burgundians were hurling thousands of lances into their long expected attack on Lorraine. He cursed the attendants who held him to his bed, demanding in a terrible voice that he be allowed to lead the counterattack. The placid Margaret lost her poise at the sight of his wild eyes, and prayed hysterically that it might be really the fever that spoke through his burning

lips. To her as to many another in the sick room, the threat of Burgundy had all the sound of a prophecy.

But the Duke rallied. He lived on from day to day, a peevish autocrat whose violent whims wore his court to the point of hysteria. For his immediate family there was little sleep and no rest.

René and Isabelle were given time for scarcely a word in private. On such occasions as allowed René a respite from his vigil he was forced to take the saddle and go abroad on minor bits of warfaring. For the duchy was in a state of disaffection, particularly about Toul where the citizens had developed an amazing antipathy to ducal taxes on such unessentials as windows and chimneys. Burgundian influence always active in Lorraine was more than usually busy in anticipation of the Duke's death . . . So René's plans for a new era of understanding in his own household were held in abeyance.

Disquieting rumors came from France—rumors of a truce with Burgundy at a moment when a single blow might have wiped the invaders from the continent—rumors of a haphazard support of Jeanne Darc in her renewal of the fighting—then rumors that she had been betrayed by the Burgundians and sold to the English. René dispatched messengers to King Charles for more complete news. And while awaiting their return he cursed the luck that had brought him back from Rheims.

Isabelle made no comment, but René suspected that the stories of Jeanne's reverses did not have anything to do with her sleepless nights. René's lute hung on a peg in the *salle des chevaliers*. As more and more details were received from Normandy he left his punitive expeditions more and more to the leadership of

Raoul de Montfort. Meanwhile he haggled for days at a time with Lombards in a vain attempt to raise gold for the ransom of a girl said to be held captive at Rouen.

The Duke Charles raised himself one day to curse Burgundy and was cut off before his peroration by a stroke of apoplexy. And, oh seigneurs, what a funeral!

It lasted six weeks as was the custom with the ruling house of Lorraine. Each day René listened with impatience to the histrionic mourning of the household and the routine chant of the funeral chorus. Each day he attended the burlesque feast of Barmecides in the room where Charles had died.

"Lay a cover for his highness!"

. . . Save for the grim figure of the old man he had known as a father lying there, gray and shrunken in his robes of state, René would have laughed aloud as the heralds raised the cry . . .

"Lay a cover for his highness!"

He sat solemnly at the table as the servitors entered and spread a generous feast before the old Duke's vacant chair.

"Serve his highness!"

The covers were taken from the dishes and the food made ready for the pleasure of the ghostly diner . . . Day after day this mortuary farce! René gazed at the black hangings and the artificial tears of the candles. O Lord, how long!

"His highness is served."

Pages took up the salvers, still full and steaming hot, for the appetites of dead men are notoriously poor. From the street without arose the cries of the paupers fighting for a share in the distribution of the

mortuary banquet that was theirs by right of long established custom.

And this sort of ceremonial went on and on and on, until the drapers of Nancy should obtain the materials for the mourning garments so essential to the success of a court funeral. René felt himself sympathizing with the dead Duke pursued by female vanity even to the grave. But eventually the masque came to its climax. The knights and nobles and rich men and poor men paraded the streets with torches and lanterns and tapers, all of them cowed as fashionably as their financial standing warranted, and giving as fair an imitation of grief as their talent for mummery permitted.

Then they buried the Duke in the chapel of St. George. The interment seemed to be something of an anticlimax after so much preparation.

The chivalry of Eastern France stood at last in the Church of St. Evre to see René receive the coronet of the Duchy. It was a brilliant ceremony—scarcely less gaudy than the coronation at Rheims which René remembered chiefly as a haze of candle smoke through which a girl's animated face alternately shone and dimmed. A forest of lances filled the church. Metal-threaded brocade and Flemish lace, velvets with the sheen of bronze, and strange glittering yellow satins for Cathay made the nave a field of gold.

On a dais beside the altar knelt René, a bit worn and thin but handsome still, and Isabelle, "pride of Lorraine," bright-eyed, eager, and smiling. Seldom had so beautiful a woman taken the crown of authority in Lorraine, or for that matter in France. Many a man among the thousands whose rowels clattered on the stone floor envied René, not for his dukedom but

for his wife. The proud lift of her head, the rigid line of her thin lips, did not detract from her charm in her new rôle. She was a duchess now—but she had always looked like one.

Arm in arm René and Isabelle passed down through the nave and out across the portico. A dusty messenger was kneeling under the arch with a bit of parchment in his hand. With a swift movement, visible to no one in the Duke's retinue, he gave the scroll to René. Just as quickly and with as little display, René opened and read a message in the hand of the King:

"La Pucelle is dead! They burned her at Rouen on the thirtieth May. . . ."

The nobles and warriors who—unable to find a place in the church—had packed the great square, set up a shout—a spontaneous tribute to the soldier rather than to the duke. A score of powerful knights bent their knees in token of vassalage. Isabelle flushed with pride, but René was staring straight ahead like a man struck blind. The square was black before him—a void pricked out with triangles of light where the sun glinted on the lances and pikes.

"God help me!" he prayed in a dull voice that his wife heard only as an incoherent mumbling. "My White Queen is dead! Dead!"

Then with a sudden wild laugh he drew his sword and waved it above his head.

"My people," he shouted, "my soldiers, my friends. . . . My fortunes are yours and yours are mine . . . We shall live and die together . . ."

And then they cheered the louder and broke up into hilarious groups to seek the inns and proper means for celebrating so joyous an event. . . .

Book Two

War

I

BOSON the magician drew his worn cloak tighter about his thin shoulders and edged closer to the broad fireplace. On a stool of carved oak sat the Duke René strumming his lute and gazing at the pictures in the fire. The winter darkness had come early in the Hall of the Stag and now the old ghosts moved freely through a gloom made more impenetrable by contrasting reflections where the red of the flames wavered over the scroll work on the high vaults.

Boson was now one thousand and fifteen years old—fifteen years older than he had been when last he sat on this hearth to cast the horoscope of the boy whom the stars had marked for greatness and for woe. He was a changed Boson. His magical gifts were unimpaired. His skill at prophecy was quite as great as it had ever been, and the continent of Europe boasted no sage who confessed to such talents for necromancy, legerdemain, astrology, divination and the kindred sciences. But he was a bit more mature . . . and a bit less grand in his appearance.

The amulet set with the seven seals of Babylonian doom was gone. René stopped his music long enough to note its absence.

“Oh, the amulet,” said Boson with all his old time pomposity. “I gave it to a Lombard who befriended me in an hour of need.”

"Hour of need," commented René. "I was under the impression that your four thousand years of experience in dealing with frail human nature would keep you free from such things as hours of need."

"Human nature had nothing to do with it," snapped the magician. "The stars were in the wrong conjunction, if you know what I mean, and the evil spirits that I have been fighting these many centuries temporarily nullified my magic."

"That must have been disconcerting I am sure."

"Disconcerting is no word for it. I shall confess to you my friend that I the great Boson was almost put to an invocation of the Chaldean sciences, which as you know is the last extremity to which a skilled magician will go."

"I can well believe it."

"However, I was strong enough to conquer the adverse influences without loosing forces that might have worked havoc among the uninitiate for hundreds of years to come. I came upon this Lombard in Savoy. He was a money lender but not a bad chap. Despite all the evil forces working to circumvent me he took me into his own house and fitted up a very good room as a laboratory for my use. I was with him for many months compounding the ingredients of an elixir which I alone of all men now living can mix according to the secret formula. This mystical potion I prepared for his use out of gratitude for his interest in my work. He was growing old and yearned for his lost youth—silly of him, of course, but that is the way he felt about it. And so I concocted for him my youth-restoring elixir. Meanwhile I gave him my amulet. It was wrought gold, you may remember, and set with some very good pearls. I gave it to him purely as a loan, you understand. He was to have given it back

as soon as I should have found the missing ingredients of the elixir. But unfortunately he died after drinking the potion and in the excitement of the funeral the amulet got lost."

"I am shocked to hear of it."

"Of course it was a great loss. But it is only temporary. I have set my magic at work to locate it and eventually it will return. I might have made quicker work of the recovery but I heard of the sad death of my old friend the Duke Charles and I came to Nancy in spite of the evil spirits.

"Kind of you, certainly."

"I thought my counsel might be of some use now that he is gone. I understand that many things have been happening to you since the last interesting conversation we had in this room. . . . I told you of your destiny, I remember. . . . How the stars had marked you for great things. And you quarreled with me about it. I presume you are willing to admit now that I was right."

"Undoubtedly, my magical friend. In at least one thing you couldn't have guessed more accurately. You said that women would make me a lot of trouble. . . . They have."

"I was certain of it. The stars do not lie . . ."

He seemed to draw his watery old eyes back under his bushy gray brows.

"You were thinking of becoming a king, I remember. Have you made any progress?"

René smiled.

"None," he admitted. "If your gifts of penetration hadn't made you aware of it already I should have to tell you that I have abandoned the idea. Only a child would care to be a king."

Boson nickered like a horse. He stroked his long

thin nose and crumpled the parchment of his cheeks until his wrinkles wove themselves into strange and mystic symbols.

"Where do your ambitions lead you now?" he asked with a hint of malice.

"I have no ambitions," said René. "All I wish is to be let alone."

"That is the most ambitious wish you could make. For a younger son it might seem a simple request. For a duke it is impossible."

"I am beginning to realize that."

"I told you once that you were not a free agent. You can't get away from your Destiny."

"Destiny! Bosh! It isn't my Destiny that worries me. It's the homemade Destinies of other people that constitute my chief care. I never do anything of my own choosing. I go to war because somebody comes looking for a fight. I live my home life to suit female whims. If I should care to go to Jerusalem I should have to stay here and take care of Lorraine. If I should care to go a troubadouring I am certain to hear of some new rebellion in Toul or Clermont or Verdun. My Destiny is always a distasteful job handed to me by someone else. . . ."

"We quarrel about definitions. What is Destiny but a combination of circumstances that compels us to live certain lives. It is not necessarily subjective."

"If Antoine de Vaudemont and the Duke of Burgundy are the combination of circumstance that make up my Destiny all I can say is that Destiny is a nuisance."

"It surely is that. But you must remember that you are as much a part of their Destiny as they are of yours, and they probably feel the same way about it."

"Well, it ought to tax the brain of any magician,

even so well-trained a magician as yourself, my dear Boson, to guess how so well-muddled a future is going to turn out."

Boson smiled and looked like a satyr.

"To be candid with you it does," he said. "But even so I can see quite a distance into it. For one thing I know that you have had some sorrow and that you are going to have a lot more."

"Probably, but I can't see that it requires any training in Chaldean sciences to notice that. Every man has had sorrow and will have more."

"And you more than other men because you are in rebellion against the world and against yourself. Another man's happiness you would experience as woe."

René was silent, but the minors that sobbed in the lute strings attested the truth of Boson's comment. The old magician stared more fixedly at the flames.

"And I believe," he said at length, "that you will really be a king."

René stopped playing.

"I sincerely hope," he declared, "that this is more of your magic. I should hate to think that there is any chance of its turning out to be true."

Boson took no offense.

"It is not magic," he admitted. "It is common sense. I have not lived all these years without learning that fortune always gives us precisely what we do not want. When you wished to be a king I did not need to call upon occult powers to learn that you would never wear a crown. But now, you see, everything is different. You do not care to wear the ermine. What, then, could be more evident than that you will wear it. Human life is like that. You can't change it."

"For once," replied René, "I can almost believe that you are right. . . ."

He sat for a long time in silence gazing at the phantoms in the fire.



IT seemed to René that the population of Nancy was made up exclusively of women. Girls with languorous eyes smiled at him in the corridors. Maids whose modesty must have delighted the Lady Margaret pressed him with sighing questions concerning the piety of Jeanette of Domremy. . . . If they asked him also concerning himself and other handsome scamps, who can say that their motives were not of the best. Matrons, whom experience had made certain of their charms, were always brushing against him in the dark turns of the stairs. And René smiled at some, told lies to others and dutifully kissed the rest, albeit his heart was not in his work. It seemed to be the easiest thing to do.

There were scores of new faces in the court since he had left it to follow La Pucelle, some of them carefully selected foils for the beauty of Isabelle of Lorraine, some of them beauties in their own right. One, a pretty red-haired child—Jehanne de Laval she was called—was ubiquitous, a sprite seemingly bent on mischief that she never quite got around to performing, a faërie creature whom the men loved for her laughter and the women for her lack of years. René noticed her principally because during all the long winter's vigil he had never once met her in the numerous accidental encounters through which he had become acquainted with the other female ornaments of the house.

Yet somehow he felt that the child was never far from him—that her eager, inquisitive eyes were continually seeking him out in the throng. And he found it very easy to return her elfin smile even though he failed to see any promise of beauty in her thin little face and slatty figure. . . . There was something about her that reminded René of the Lady of the Firelight. But the resemblance, he thought, might have seemed stronger, had he not known Jeanne Darc.

As for the rest they were mildly interesting. He admired them for their pictorial effect and was amused by the simple beauty of their technique. Nancy would have been a dull place without them, he felt. And yet they were a good bit of a nuisance. Their modest sighs interrupted his lute practice and their eternal business in the corridors interfered seriously with his privacy. Even the *salle des chevaliers* was no longer a refuge from them. The Duke found the quiet of the Hall of the Stag more and more desirable as the uneventful weeks succeeding the coronation went on.

The women never ventured to follow him to this retreat. It was one of the unwritten laws of the palace that they were not to cross the threshold—and furthermore René had early formed the habit of locking the door and keeping the key.

So it was with a certain amount of annoyance that one evening he was interrupted in the midst of a particularly morose and lovely *chanson* by the shooting of the bolt. The door swung open and as suddenly closed and a woman came toward the fireplace out of the shadow.

René, prepared to be angry, felt a chill that made anger seem a trivial emotion. He lifted his hand from the lute so suddenly that a string snapped. And he

stood for a moment staring into the gloom, unwilling to admit that the newcomer might be a ghost, unable to explain her presence otherwise.

"Yvette," he exclaimed unbelievably. "Yvette de Souigny!"

She came to the fireplace with an easy stride quite characteristic of her and seated herself with a neatly executed and somewhat revealing flurry of skirts.

"Yes, my dear," she admitted placidly. "Yvette. Sit down, your highness. Don't stand up on my account."

René sank to the bench, still scrutinizing her. Dead or alive this was certainly Yvette, beautiful as ever and as insolent. She did not wait for him to speak.

"Queer isn't it that I should be sitting here with you," she said. "Here with René of Bar in this dismal old barrack with its atrocious decorations and uncomfortable furniture. I wonder my René, if we haven't dreamed all the things that have happened since we last met here—ten minutes ago—or maybe ten years ago . . . It seems to me that you have just come in from killing De Sampigny. You kissed me, don't you remember."

René's surprise was vanishing. He laughed.

"Did I?" he inquired politely. "I wasn't sure. I have such a faulty memory."

She shook her head.

"Your memory is good enough," she contradicted. "You haven't forgotten. Neither have I."

"You are beautiful," commented René just to make conversation. "Your eyes are . . . Well, there is no need of going into that now, and anyway I can't think of a good simile offhand. But I seem to remember, my dear, that my last information concerning you led me to believe that we had taken a long farewell.

There is an air of finality about a funeral—even when the whereabouts of the corpse is dubious.”

“There is no finality about a funeral until the corpse is dead,” she replied with a deprecating gesture. “I am sorry that you, of all men, had to be tricked by a hoax that I had arranged for Dubois.”

“Well, anyway I don’t like such things. Before the pall was lifted I saw you as dead. And you may have heard that I said a prayer for you—a very good prayer, too, although I thought at the time that it probably would be wasted. And I swore that I should kill that leering husband of yours at the earliest opportunity.”

She drooped her head slightly and looked up at him wide-eyed and appealing through a veil of long lashes. If it were possible for Yvette to look maidenly, she looked so then.

“I am sorry that I disappointed you by being alive when I should have been dead,” she told him in a tremulous tone. “And I thank you for the prayer. My sister told me that you seemed quite sincere about it. As for my husband you won’t have to kill him.”

“Reconciled?”

“Reconciled to fate, yes, but not to Dubois. He had a lamentable misfortune after you left Metz. He died cursing my poor little sister. He had some strange idea that she had poisoned him.”

“And of course she hadn’t.”

“Of course not. But Dubois was like that—just a big wholesome boy always leaping at conclusions. I really miss him dreadfully. He was primitive, of course, but a lovable chap when you got to know him. . . . The soul of honor. At times he was capable of showing the sweetest disposition that I have ever seen in a man.”

René scratched his head.

"Are you speaking of Dubois?" he interrupted.

"Surely," she said. "If I say things that surprise you, remember that I knew him better than you did."

"I knew him well enough."

"A lot of men talked that way about him but I can tell you René that being a widow makes one think of lots of things. I can remember kindnesses he showed me. It almost makes me weep to think of them."

"And if he had not died, I suppose you would have romped right back to be hanged as he had intended you to be."

She sighed.

"No," she said. "I don't think he would have had the heart to kill me after that first headstrong boyish impulse. If he had, of course, I should have been forced to poignard him. . . ."

And she sighed once more as befitted a maiden resigned to the caprices of fate.

René replaced the broken string and tuned the lute.

"Play something sad," she suggested. "I am in a sentimental mood this evening."

"I have never known you to be otherwise," said the Duke as he traced out a lugubrious chanson of love in a series of weeping minors. "It's your capacity for love that has made you so much trouble, my dear. . . . Your great heart that speaks through your beautiful eyes."

"You say lovely things, René." Her voice was passionate and her cheeks were white. "But you are too facile . . . You said that you had forgotten. And I could not forget."

"I was jesting," declared René. "I am free to confess that forgetting you even for a moment would be difficult, my dear—not to say dangerous. You are as talented and lovely a woman as I have ever met."

"You do not think ill of me because of Dubois, my René? You do not think I should have stayed to be hanged?"

"Not at all, Yvette. You may remember that I do not share your regrets over him. Your picture of him is not familiar to me."

"I suppose my love distorts my vision," she admitted. "It is true that for all his qualities he might have been a better husband, René. He was untrue to me."

"I can't conceive of such a thing. How you must have suffered!" And he went on with his doleful chanson.

"But all that old life is behind me now," she went on after a suitable pause. "I am going to stay permanently in Nancy."

"You don't know how happy you make me with that message!"

"It is true, René. I am to be a lady in waiting to my kinswoman the Duchess Isabelle—and if you will only be kind to me sometimes I think I can forget those terrible days in Metz."

"How did you get in here?" inquired René without changing the amorous pitch of his voice.

"I had a key made," she said with a pretty little play of confidence. "I knew you would be here and I knew you wouldn't care to have me pounding on the door and attracting the attention of the household when I came here for a conference."

"You are quite right," he assured her. "And if you should find the lock changed to-morrow don't hesitate to have another key made. But I hope you will pardon me, my dear. There are certain matters that I must discuss with Isabelle . . . You don't mind my going?"

"Not at all. I shall rest better to-night in the thought that the same roof shelters us both. Through the darkness I shall hear the beating of your heart. I have an apartment of my own in the east wing—third floor, first room to the right of the tourelle. It is a nice room although, unfortunately the latch on the door is broken . . ."

René arose and hung his lute beside the fireplace.

"I am sure life is going to be more interesting for both of us now that you are a member of the household," he told her with obvious sincerity. "And I do not think I need tell you that I shall be thinking of you constantly."

"You are a darling," she murmured huskily. "I used to wish that I could have met you before I was married to Dubois. But now I do not care. I am near you, René. No one can take you away from me now. . . . And I have never forgotten how we met here in this very room. And I have forgiven you for mistrusting me. A love such as mine will forgive anything . . . You kissed me. Ah, I have remembered how you kissed me, René. You may kiss me again if you like."

And he did kiss her without further suggestion. But first he pinioned her arms in an ardent embrace. For he remembered other things besides the kiss of which she spoke so feelingly. And he was not wearing his chain shirt that evening.

Yvette's amorous discourse had brought back to his memory a number of things forgotten in the rush of business that had come with his succession to the dukedom. Among other things he had planned a heart-to-heart talk with Isabelle—a search for a basis of common understanding—a new courtship and possibly

a honeymoon that might lead to a semblance of domestic happiness.

Also he wished to question her concerning the addition of Yvette de Souigny to her retinue. It was a matter of piquant interest.



THE Duchess Isabelle, dressed as always in a gown of black velvet, was spinning beneath a flambeau on a golden standard when René entered. Her chattering handmaidens, similarly employed, were grouped about her in cozy intimacy. Their buoyant conversation ceased at once when they saw the Duke. All but Isabelle arose and curtsied. The Duchess looked at him with considerable surprise and no great warmth of welcome.

"What brings you here so early?" she asked. "I was just remarking to Agnes that the riot downstairs seems more than ordinarily hilarious to-night."

"I hadn't noticed it," replied René. "I was just thinking how nice it would be to spend the evening with you."

The ladies in waiting simpered as they felt themselves called upon to do. Isabelle looked up at her husband oddly.

"What have you been up to now?" she queried with a little nervous laugh. "You can't have been drinking much. It's too early in the evening."

René winced but he met the lady's mood with a conciliatory smile.

"I have come here to spend the evening with my wife," he repeated. "Surely I could not hope to find a more beautiful companion."

Isabelle made an impatient gesture.

"Don't practice speeches on me," she advised. "You probably can find amusement enough downstairs without me."

The handmaidens—most of them—smiled with an air as closely approximating neutrality as was possible under the circumstances. But René was conscious of the eyes of the child Jehanne peering at him from the shadow beyond the dancing ring of the flambeau. He felt like taking Isabelle's advice without further comment, but he knew that would have been a definite end to a worthy undertaking. From beneath his cloak he drew a string of pearls. He ran them through his fingers under the light and allowed them to trickle down into her lap, bubbles of scintillance.

"I have brought you a little present," he explained. "Not pretty enough for you, but the best a messenger could find in Italy after a month's search."

She scarcely looked at them, but ran her fingers idly along the string as she raised her eyes and studied him intently.

"They are very pretty," she said perfunctorily. "But what is the reason for them?"

"Must there be a reason for every gift that a man brings to his wife?"

"In many cases, yes . . ."

René felt the hopelessness of the task he had set for himself. But his voice was unruffled as he pursued his argument.

"I have brought them, my Isabelle, merely because I have felt lately that we should know each other better. Why should it be strange that a creature so lovely as you should have her own husband for a suitor?"

Her answering smile was mockery.

"Just what do you want me to do?" she asked.

"Well, as a beginning you might dismiss these ladies for the night—unless you prefer to have me continue my love-making before an audience."

"I am quite sure I don't know what's come over you. I never heard of such a silly idea. As for dismissing these girls it's hardly fair to them. They are young and should have an opportunity to study the technique of a lover so expert as yourself."

There was pure malice in her gay tone directed entirely at René. But the ladies grew fidgety. One or two of them blushed without effort.

"I don't think that in the main they need any teacher," the Duke observed drily. "Love-making comes to a pretty woman as naturally as breathing and it does a homely woman no good. As far as I am concerned I don't care whether they stay here or not. It's no secret to most of them that I am your legal husband. I've made no attempt to conceal it although you may not believe me when I say so. But after all there should be some privacy about a wooing . . . I understand it's the accepted practice in such things."

Isabelle sniffed.

"Very well," she said with a fine air of meekness. "You are Duke of Lorraine now and legally constituted to do as you please."

She turned to the ladies in waiting.

"You may go," she directed them. "To-morrow night I hope we may be able to go on with our work uninterrupted."

The women filed out. The child Jehanne was the last to go and her eyes were on René until she had reached the threshold. The Duke was certain that she had no part in the muffled laughter that accompanied

the ladies in their progress down the winding stairs. René closed the door.

Isabelle was still gazing at her husband with a mixture of annoyance and puzzlement when he came to her and ran a gentle hand over her hair. He drew up a chair beside her.

"Well," she inquired petulantly, "what next?"

"I have been thinking, Isabelle, that inasmuch as you and I are linked inseparably till death do us part, and all that sort of thing, we might try to make less of a mess of it than your father and mother did."

"Their affairs were their own," she reminded him.

"And ours," he corrected. "It is foolish to deny that their theories of matrimony were made ours, willy nilly. We were married without love. We were brought up without it. And yet I think that if we had been allowed to work out our Destinies as other folks do we mightn't have found each other so difficult."

She reddened with anger.

"If you have come to hint that I haven't been a good and faithful wife to you I shall tell you now that you lie and ask you to leave me in peace."

"I haven't hinted such a thing, Isabelle, I came here to see if I couldn't prove to you that love is something besides physical virute and dogged fidelity. I came, as I am quite ready to confess, because I believe that demonstrative affection is as much your due as mine. I can hardly criticize you for your frigidity when I have been guilty of the same sin."

"I am certainly glad to hear you say that after all these years." Her voice was bitter but her lips had begun to quiver and there was moisture in her eyes. He put an arm about her and drew her close. She did not resist.

"I should like to have your confidence, Isabelle. I

am asking that you let me share your life—that you give me more of your time and let me give you more of mine. If we are patient with one another we may be able to work out some basis of companionship.”

She had begun to cry softly. The pearl necklace had slipped unnoticed to the floor and in spite of himself René recalled vividly another day in this same room when he had brought his child wife a doll . . .

“What is the need of my telling you that I love you, René?” she asked brokenly. “I have borne you children—that’s love isn’t it? I’ve tried to live so that you wouldn’t be ashamed of me. I’ve prayed for you night and day when you were out fighting wars that were no real concern to you—galloping over the countryside with another woman.

“It’s no fault of mine that you won’t take an interest in the things that interest me. We have different sets of ideals, René. I was always taught to take things seriously. You have done nothing but play since poor father first showed you how to ride a horse. You haven’t appreciated a home because you never knew what a home meant. I am not blaming you. If beginnings had been different the things that followed might have been different.”

René started once or twice to reply, but instead he stroked her hair and tried to comfort her while his fixed smile struggled against the hopelessness of his eyes . . .

“I like you, René. I like to have you fondle me. But it seems a sinful waste of time when there are so many things to be done. And now I hope you understand.”

“Yes,” he said dully. “I suppose I understand. It’s just that a practical and useful love wasn’t born in me. Still I can’t help but think that if we had been

just plain René and Isabelle of Nowhere-in-particular we might have been a lot happier." He kissed her again and picked up the necklace. He closed her fingers about it as he arose.

"Didn't I see Yvette de Souigny downstairs to-night?" he asked with an easy return to his matter-of-fact tone.

"Yes," said Isabelle. "She came to me yesterday. I hadn't seen her in years and years. Her husband died recently. He was a brute. It seems strange to me that so many marriages turn out unhappily. She's a dear sweet girl, just as my Cousin Jean said she would be and I'm sure the house will be brighter for her being here."

"Just the same Isabelle, I don't think she is exactly the right sort of companion for you. I don't like her."

"You don't like her." Isabelle's voice was perfectly controlled for all its hint of sarcasm. "That makes her more interesting than I had suspected. The one woman in Lorraine whom René doesn't like."

The Duke could not but feel the quick drift toward their old relationship. He smiled half-heartedly.

"Whether she is the only one or not I shan't attempt to argue," he said. "But I repeat that I don't like her. I am not attempting to dictate to you, my love, nor even to advise you. But I shall say that were I in your place I should certainly give Yvette her congé. She's a dangerous woman."

"It seems to me that you are a bit positive about women—other women. For all that you protest such slight acquaintance with them they seem to have few secrets from you."

"I know Yvette a little better than slightly," he said, without rising to her temper. "She is the lady who was hunted through the streets of Nancy on the

night De Sampigny was killed. She has a knack of being present when good men—and sometimes poor ones—find themselves called upon to die. If she's in Nancy it isn't because she enjoys the spectacle of your golden hair . . ."

Isabelle's suspicions were back in her eyes.

"I like Yvette," she told him. "She is friendless and alone. She is my kinswoman and I feel a certain responsibility for her. I haven't any proof but your statement that she was in Nancy on the night you killed De Sampigny. And it is quite within belief that animus may have distorted your vision. I have noticed this about Yvette: She is most unpopular with those whom she has been compelled to repulse. I should hesitate to think, my dear, that you may be classified with the rest." René looked at her in angry astonishment.

"Those she has been compelled to repulse," he repeated. "The word *compelled* is well chosen. Yvette! Repulse! Oh, justice for Jezebel, fairest and most chaste of her sex!"

"At any rate," declared Isabelle with tightening lips, "she stays. I am mistress of my own apartments. I choose my own friends."

"Yes," he conceded with barely a trace of bitterness. "I have noticed that. I had hoped to offer you my companionship and you refuse to listen. But Yvette stays to stir up more havoc."

"I can't abide companions who quarrel with me," she replied. "And you always do. You always manage to make a scene over everything I do or say . . ."

"Please don't be angry with me," said René with an effort. He kissed her again, passionately, determined to play his part to the last. But his crushing embrace brought no response. She was picking up her flax as he left her.

IV

THE quiet of Nancy did not deceive René. Over the frontier of Burgundy was trouble that would not be long in reaching Lorraine.

Antoine de Vaudemont had filed his formal claim to the Duchy of Lorraine as the nearest male relative of the late Charles. And it was to be expected that Philippe of Dijon would look favorably on any campaign that would remove René and put a friend at the head of the territory that separated North and South Burgundy. Geography would have warned René what to expect, even had there not been the added hint of woe in the presence of Yvette de Souigny.

And so it came about that lances began to sprout in Lorraine. There were a thousand Scotch archers scattered about Clermont en Argonne, Bar le Duc and Verdun, some two thousand German pikemen in barracks along the Moselle and cavaliers without number riding in from the hills. In Nancy itself masons repaired the stout enceintes but there was no other hint of military activity. René had no intention of giving Yvette an erroneous idea that he was seeking to take the field. It was barely possible that she might tell somebody about it.

René continued to see much of pretty little Jehanne. She avoided him assiduously but the occasions for such avoidance were quite as frequent as his none-too-accidental meetings with the less retiring members of Isabelle's retinue. She was always in flight just ahead of him down the stairs or disappearing through a doorway at his approach. Frequently he felt her eyes on

him from the protection of a latticed window. Sometimes he came upon her suddenly and spoke to her, amused at her embarrassment.

He learned that she was an orphan and that she was afraid of men. She hoped some day, she told him in a moment of unusual confidence, to become a nun when Isabelle should have no further need for her services. He thought that an odd ambition for a lady in a court where female piety was more or less objective. But somehow it did not seem strange in Jehanne. Her big eyes saw everything and yet, apparently, she saw nothing. She was two persons, he discovered, the quiet, well-poised woman who stood beside the Duchess in affairs of the court, and the child who avoided him in the corridors. He felt her sincerity intuitively and so was disposed to learn more of the psychology that governed her actions. In the end he decided that she was a woman and let it go at that.

Yvette de Souigny had assumed a modest demeanor of quite another sort. She, too, gave an impression of detachment from the gayeties of her surroundings that might have seemed more authentic had her bosom heaved less readily and her ankles been more discreetly concealed. Yvette's ingenuous pose was charming but not at all deceptive.

She could not forget René's kiss. She told him so frequently. She had a directness with him that he preferred to her newly acquired atmosphere of innocence. And she was persistent, as witness the fact that she had keys made for the door leading into the Hall of the Stag as often as he found occasion to have the tumblers changed. It got to be something of a joke with them. But René kept a bit ahead of her in the

contest, for he always had the benefit of a new lock for at least one day.

René was surprised to see that Yvette made something of an impression on Raoul de Montfort. One evening he saw Raoul kissing her—or perhaps it was the other way about—in the shadowy anteroom of the chapel. Yvette was quite annoyed with Raoul . . . especially when she noticed that René had been a witness to the scene. She spoke to him sharply and he answered in kind.

“Don’t be alarmed, my turtle doves,” said René soothingly. “Surely the sweetness of Yvette and the sourness of Raoul should make an ideal combination.”

“That seems to be what he thinks,” replied Yvette tartly. “What sort of a place is this getting to be when a girl can’t go to her prayers without being accosted at the very door of the chapel?”

Raoul was staring at her with his mouth half open. He seemed to be finding her a very different damoiselle from the one who had just fallen trembling against him in the half-light.

“Please don’t be put out with Raoul,” pleaded René maliciously. “He can’t resist a saintly face. He is a born philanderer—a sort of wolf in sheep’s clothing and he has left a trail of broken hearts from Jerusalem to Noisy-le-Sec and perhaps points farther north.”

Raoul succeeded in muttering something unintelligible.

“I dare say his intentions were good,” conceded Yvette. “I am a poor widow and entirely unsophisticated even if I do try to protect myself against the insidious influences of men. I suppose the poor fellow thought he was paying me a compliment.”

“Quite likely,” agreed René. “Raoul is always run-

ning after women with the best intentions in the world."

"Women! Bah!" broke in Raoul. "Do you think for a moment that I was making advances to this wench?"

"You seemed to be doing something of the sort, yes," commented René judiciously. "And doing it quite well, too."

Raoul muttered under his breath some words that René wisely conjectured might not bear repetition aloud in mixed company.

"I am quite ready to forgive him," said Yvette sweetly. "I don't mind being kissed—honestly I don't. It's just that things like that detract more than I can tell from a spiritual trend of thought. I tripped just as I was coming out of the chapel and the *Sieur de Montfort* caught me in his arms. I suppose I trembled a little—what girl wouldn't in a similar position?"

"What girl, indeed," observed René. "And I don't know a man in Nancy who would fail to meet the situation as Raoul met it."

Raoul, who felt somehow that Yvette had not tripped and that a pair of arms had been about his neck before he rose so manfully to the occasion, did not venture a reply. But he noted that Yvette was not bad to look at. This phenomenon occupied his mind as he followed René down the stairs toward the Hall of the Stag. It was still claiming his attention when the Duke spoke to him.

"I don't suppose advice is necessary to an old stager like you, Raoul," René began. "But as one who knows I'd say that the men who come close to Yvette usually arrive at novel and amusing ends."

"She is the most remarkable woman I ever saw in my life," commented Raoul half consciously. "I

can't imagine how I mustered up courage enough to kiss a being so splendid as she is."

"You probably didn't," declared René bluntly. "She could make a holy hermit kiss her—and you're no holy hermit."

"Do you mean to hint that a woman as fine as she is could possibly stoop to the tricks of. . . ."

René interrupted him with a bored gesture.

"Listen, Raoul," he said. "I know all about the virtues of this lady . . . probably a great deal better than you do. What is your opinion of women in general?"

"What are you asking me that for? You know what I think of them. I've told you often enough. If it weren't for the stupid custom of propagation I'd say that the world would be better off if the whole lot of them could be removed at once."

"And then on the other side of the picture is Yvette de Souigny who has no more sex appeal than Phryne . . . who. . . ."

"Yes, on the other hand is Yvette de Souigny who is uplifting enough to make the devil go to mass."

"She'd make the devil go to mass all right if he could be certain of pushing aside enough simpletons to get a good look at her, Raoul. Yvette is attractive not because she is an improvement over other women but because she has all the seductive tricks of her sex developed to an unbelievable efficiency. Don't get it into your head that I don't admire Yvette. I should be the last man in Nancy to discredit her manifest talents. But I should suggest—not in any hope that you may listen to advice—that you watch your step."

Raoul did not seem to have heard him.

"She is beautiful," he declared ardently. "A goddess of love . . . What a rotten mess this world is.

We travel through it—nearly all of us mismated and unhappy. If only I could have had that woman for a wife what a man I might have been.”

René looked at him pityingly.

“You certainly would have worked at your trade as a husband while you lasted,” he said.

René had few fears for Raoul. He believed that the morning would find the *Sieur de Montfort* forgetful of the charms thrust upon him unawares in the blue and gold twilight of the chapel. Raoul's grounding of suspicion was too firm to be shaken, he thought, by even so entrancing a creature as *Yvette*.

But the next day he found Raoul talking earnestly with the widow of the unfortunate *Dubois*. And he saw them together frequently after that.

He marveled that despite her bold maneuvering *Yvette* should maintain before the court her standing as a modest and virtuous young woman harried by the attentions of unsought admirers. That Raoul should be stricken blind might not seem so odd if one admitted the premise that it was possible for him to fall in love at all. That the rest of the knights and ladies should have shown no more perception than Raoul made René wonder at their lack of intelligence.

Her trysts with the *Sieur de Montfort* did not prevent *Yvette's* appearance in the Hall of the Stag whenever she succeeded in having a key made to fit the door. And on such occasions she took the rôle he knew so well. With him she was candid to the point of overfrankness. She toyed with the deceit, so transparent to both of them—that she loved him to distraction and that he was her relentless wooer.

She listened attentively to his lute playing and made little verses of her own to fit his music. He was forced

to admit that she was rather good at it . . . almost as poetic in her chansons as she was in her amours. He noticed quickly that her open acceptance of their comic relationship, her laughing pretense that they were passionate lovers, was not without its purpose. Under it ran a counterpoint of more subtle appeal that might have escaped the attention of a man less suspicious than René of Bar and Lorraine. At each meeting she repeated the lines of love that had aroused only his banter. But she never failed to surprise him with some new exposition of her many-sided character.

Once in particular she came so close to breaking down his reserve that the idealized face of little Jeanne of Domremy became for the moment a dim outline in his memory.

She was seated as usual on the bench before the fireplace and suddenly with a shrug of her shoulders drew away from him, yawned and stretched her arms out before her.

"This horseplay about love and all that sort of rot is a terrible bore," she said in a matter-of-fact tone. She lifted her skirts and straightened her stocking, but with no more attention to him than if he had been a woman. And when she spoke again it was as a man might have spoken to a man.

"I've been doing this sort of thing ever since I can remember," she confessed. "And you are the only man in all the mobs of nincompoops with whom I have had to deal who didn't fall for it. I don't come here because I like your sprightly conversation but just to get a rest."

René's heart skipped a beat and he felt a sense of intoxication.

"You do it quite well," he assured her in a voice that concealed his emotions only by accident. "I

should imagine that you'd find considerable amusement in it."

"Oh, I do, I suppose," she admitted without hesitation. "But any sort of pretense is bound to get tiresome after a while. With the women I have to be sweet and demure until I hate myself and with the men I go on trembling and sighing until palsy and asthma would be a blessed relief.

"And I have to be so continually arranging my skirts that my ankles are frozen half the time. You can't realize what a care legs are to a woman. Jeanne Darc had the right idea. She wore armor and forgot she had any. But I have to make use of mine if I am to go on making myself agreeable to the males of your rather uninteresting household."

"Why do you do it?" questioned René with more or less logic.

"That's a silly question," she replied as she adjusted her bodice. "I am about on a par here with the jongleurs. I earn my bread and butter by contributing to the general amusement. I last here just so long as I am popular with your wife and I remain popular just so long as I provide situations that pique her interest. Where could I go if she turned me out?"

She crossed her legs and clasped both hands on one knee and stared resentfully into the fire.

"The lock on my door has been fixed," she said.

Yvette de Souigny never knew how close she had come to success that evening. Perhaps it was latent caution. Perhaps it was the picture of Jeanne—dim but recognizable in René's mind—that held him at his own end of the bench. He did not show further interest in the lute.

.

René always kissed Yvette when they parted com-

pany after these informal meetings, whatever had been her line of attack. But he always wore his chain shirt now, and kept wondering what she intended to do next.



ONE day Burgundy struck through the lay figure of Antoine de Vaudemont. You have heard tell, seigneurs, of this attack, first step in a Duchy's march toward Empire. Tall Flemings, gaunt Britons, murderous Burgundians, Croats, Isolanians, Spaniards, riffraff of no land at all save the great red battle fields that fly no flag, poured over the borders from Dijon and Hesdin and Luxembourg into Lorraine. René buckled himself into his cuirasse and concentrated his troops at points near Nancy with a feeling akin to relief. Whatever the outcome of the impending fight, there was some satisfaction in knowing that the suspense would soon be over.

He showed that he was not deceived as to the identity of his real enemy. He demonstrated that at the outset by raising a minor siege then in progress at Vaudemont, and hurling all his forces to the Southwest to meet the invasion under Antoine de Toulougon, Burgundy's favorite and most generally successful marshal.

Few troops rode out from Nancy for the battle—two hundred lances, perhaps—for René had carried on his mobilization as quietly as possible. He congratulated himself upon the success with which he had concealed his real strength. But all Nancy was at the gate when he gave the command to march.

It was a festival day for the townspeople. They cheered and sang boastful songs and joked with their

friends in the ranks. The soldiers caught the spirit of the occasion and passed their time as they stood at rest in the Place des Ducs taking advance orders for souvenirs such as Burgundian helmets and Flemish swords. Never had an army started forth to war with a more earnest vote of confidence or more assured of itself. René's reputation as chief aid to Jeanne Darc had made him more than a duke and leader in Lorraine. He was something of a demigod. And with the rising sun burnishing the outline of his black armor, he looked the part.

The women of the palace were astir as he came downstairs after saying farewell to his wife. The usual sighs greeted him from the usual turns in the stairs. The usual soulful eyes were full upon him as gentle creatures came shyly to bid him good-by. All in all he felt that he might have been on his way to a ducal audience instead of to a battle that might change the face of Europe, so little altered was the routine of the household.

But he did not leave the château without one surprise. From a window embrasure near the entrance to the guardroom at the grande porte stepped Jehanne de Laval. She had been crying.

"This is the last time we shall ever meet, your highness," she said. "If you come back victorious I shall be in a convent—If you don't come back—God forbid! But I should like you to know that I shall be praying for you every minute that I am awake and that I shall think of you always."

"I believe God will take care of me if you ask it, Jehanne."

"Whether I ask it or not I feel sure that you will be safe. I want you to know that I think you are the finest man I have ever met. It may be wicked but

surely there can be no harm in my telling you now. I love you even more than I do the Duchess Isabelle—and I am not ashamed to confess it.”

And then like the wraith that she had always been she leaped away from him and disappeared in the corridor with scarcely so much sound as the whispering of a skirt. René smiled wanly and strode on toward the door. . . . Poor little child! There was something of Jeanne’s spiritual flame in her . . . Yes, and something of his own suffering.

Yvette de Souligny was nowhere in evidence as he crossed the portico. He wondered at that. He had felt that she would be one of the first of the household to greet him. He more than half suspected that her interest in the coming match between Burgundy and Lorraine might go beyond the pageantry of polished armor and prancing horses. But when he had reached the narrow terrace just beyond the door, he understood her absence. She was standing at the entrance to an arbor and her white arms were about the neck of a soldier who held his casque in the crook of one arm while he embraced her with the other—Raoul de Montfort. René smiled and passed on. Whatever might be the girl’s deadening influence over the heart of his hard young warrior he would soon be out of it.

Bugles echoed in the Street of the Thievish Moor. For the first time in months the tunnel-like ruelles of Nancy reverberated to the clash of armor plate as steeled knights settled themselves in their metal crusted saddles. The guidons were up and scores of gay plumes shivered in the wind. And so René left Nancy—an Alexander about to conquer a new world.

The chivalry of Christendom was massed at Bulgne-

ville near Neufchâteau. As basis for the battle, perhaps, was the claim of Antoine de Vaudemont to the throne of Lorraine. But few of the contesting leaders who camped in silken tents on the hills about Neufchâteau on the night before the fight had ever heard of Antoine de Vaudemont nor cared whether he became a duke or a corpse through to-morrow's work. There have been such fights before, seigneurs, and probably will be again—wars that are largely sporting events played without animus or hope of a premium.

Every knight within riding distance of the Valley of the Meuse had spurred a restive charger to this highly interesting battlefield and each was governed in his choice of sides by that of his enemies. Jehan of Dinant tethered his horse with the cavalry of Burgundy not because he had any love for the Duke Philippe or any of his cutthroat following but because Philibert of Bale was resting his lance among the tents of René. And so it went.

The sun rose on one of the most amazing panoplies of war ever assembled in France. Steel threw back the lights on the hills to the north and west where the Burgundians were deploying—thousands of scintillant points like facets on a great blazing jewel. Steel and bronze made René's troops on the rising ground to the southeast a blend of molten metal. Hundreds of silken flags in both lines gave evidence to the cosmopolitan nature of the quarrel—reds and blues and bright yellows streaming from the points of lances and pikes—colors constantly blazing—constantly changing in the trappings of the horses.

As a background were the striped tents—masses of tint that took on a liquid sheen in the slowly scattering haze of the morning. René, veteran of a hundred red fields, thrilled at the sight. Here was war decked as it

should be decked in rich and barbaric splendor. It would be worth a man's while to die down there in the valley—a picture as he fought, a picture as he died.

With the colors of Lorraine were several battalions of French under Barbazan, the knight whose cool leadership had saved France from the King's friends while Jeanne Darc was dying at Rouen. On the left flank were formidable cavalry detachments from Bavaria and Baden. On the right were Angevines and Savoyards and Provençals. A pentecost of tongues shouted the battle songs of half a dozen countries, but laughter, understandable in any land, echoed between the rapidly forming lines.

René's plan of battle was simple. He outlined it rapidly as his archers were massing along the front rank in the center, and dozens of self-invited cavaliers and their ornamental retainers were squeezing into the line where opportunity offered.

"We shall take the initiative in the attack," he announced. "As soon as our visiting louts have found a place suitable for their talents we shall charge. Barbazen and I shall lead a frontal attack in two main divisions. The German cavalry will strike to the left and force them to engage their horsemen. Then, when he sees a blue and white pennant waving near my position, Raoul de Montfort will charge with a third main division against their left flank."

"There may be difficulties," demurred Barbazan. "They are the invaders. They have already taken on themselves the task of pushing the fighting. Wouldn't it be better to dig in here on the hillside and await their attack."

"As a matter of strategy, yes," admitted René. "But it wouldn't do the morale any good. A soldier

has an instinctive dislike for dying in a hole. There will be some thrill in carrying the battle to Burgundy and killing or getting killed like a man down there in the open field. Raoul's lances are well concealed in the woods to the right of our line. If we make our first shock strong enough he can deliver a flanking movement that will demoralize them."

"There is a certain amount of sense in what you say," admitted Barbazan, "although it would be a bit more conservative to cut them to bits in a counterattack. However, you know your men and it's your war. . . ."

The marshals took their posts and the bombards roared their challenge. Fifteen thousand men moved down the hill.

What a battle! The clangor of metal was half heard in the smothering throb that arose from the shaking earth. The finest warhorses on the continent of Europe were galloping to the charge. Leveled lances, aflutter with stockings and ribbons, passed over the field like a silvery chain, giving promise that the death which kept pace with them would be a highly ornamental affair. Archers of Picardy in leather jerkins and green tunics stepped out of the opposing ranks in a quiet, solid phalanx.

Then overeagerness worked its chaos among the charging Lorrainers. Archers, pikemen, bombardiers, and knights mingled, a bit disastrously for some of those on foot, and the troops stormed into the valley a torrential mob.

"Keep your distance! Keep your distance you dumb animals!" The shouts of the leaders echoed in a dozen languages.

"Guide left, you hellions, guide left."

"For St. George and Lorraine . . . For St. George

and . . . For the love of Michel steer that horse, you cockeyed sons of Sycorax!"

And from the enemy ranks, similar refrains betokening the majesty of war. "Guide left, you hellions! Guide left! For St. Andrew and Burgundy. Keep your bowstrings taut, you numskulls!"

Then as the standards of René and Barbazan reached the upward slope the Burgundians took up the gage. Concealed artillery hurled a ton of rock down the slope into the milled front ranks of Lorraine. The Picard archers, cool as village cobblers and as workmanlike, filled the air with arrows. The forward surge of René's army passed over the bodies of its own dead.

Barbazan went down with the point of a shaft sticking out of his back through a red flaw in his gear. René, white but smiling, veered to the center and took command. Again the bombards guffawed at the attackers' insolence and more dead men made a slippery pavement for the troops behind. A thousand corpses were on the field before René's lances encountered enemy metal.

It was a mad mêlée, hand to hand, sword to sword, and stirrup to stirrup. The Bavarian cavaliers swept down on the left and the cannon met them. A serpentine cracked and a stone ball struck René's horse full in the neck. The Duke went down under the deadly hammer of iron-shod hoofs. The surf of battle rolled over him and a lance cut though a joint in his plates and tore the flesh from his breast. He staggered to his feet and signaled a herald and the blue-and-white pennon of Anjou suddenly fluttered above his head.

He was weak from loss of blood and his sight was dimming, but still he was able to appraise the situation. All of De Toulangeon's army was now engaged. In a moment Raoul would crash into the Burgundian left. In a moment the warriors of Lorraine—those who re-

mained alive—would be shouting the victory. In a moment . . . Raoul. . . .

But there was no answer to the signal of the white-and-blue pennon. There was no movement in the woods. Raoul did not attack. And as he gazed dizzily over the sodden field René thought he knew why. Yvette de Souligny had done her work well.

.

René surrendered his sword to De Toulangeon and the battle was over. He noticed, just before the Burgundian marshal came to pay his respects as required by the etiquette of butchery, that a flying squadron of the enemy had stirred up a body of Lorrainers in the wood.

De Toulangeon was in the act of bowing to him when a brace of cursing Burgundians passed by with a prisoner. The man was smeared with blood and weeping bitterly. It was with difficulty that René recognized his late friend Raoul.

De Montfort stopped at sight of him in spite of the prodding lances in the hands of his captors.

"God forgive me," he prayed, "and give me strength and luck to meet that woman again. If I am ever free I shall kill her."

"Make as speedy a job of it as possible," advised René without a hint of bitterness. "Because if I am ever free again I shall kill you," Raoul hung his head and passed on.

.

In Nancy the news of the defeat was spread first by a terrorized shepherd who was immediately hanged for attempting to deceive folks with such seditious tommyrot. Then a wounded cavalier came to the Porte St. Georges to fall from his horse and die. Some of the

less loyal citizenry began to suspect that maybe after all the shepherd had been right.

All night and all the next day broken men staggered back into the town. A battered captain brought to Isabelle the message of the day's calamity. Isabelle ceased to weep, dropped her distaff and issued orders for the convening of a council of the nobles of Lorraine. Yvette de Souigny embraced her in a touching and affectionate farewell and departed with a decorous escort through the *Porte de la Craffe*, presumably for Metz.

VI

THEY took the Duke René prisoner to Dijon, seigneurs, and put him in a strong tower with double locks on the door and extra sentries in the courtyard below—for Philippe of Burgundy realized that it does not do to trifle with one's luck. There, on the day after his arrival, came a slim young man with a Valois nose and a suit of damascened armor to bid him welcome to the prison. René knew intuitively though he had never seen him before, that this must be Charles, heir presumptive of Burgundy. The two men studied each other for a long time without speaking, as if sensing in advance the trouble that they would one day make for each other—Charles, one day to be known as Charles the Bold, a dreamer who envisioned an empire, and René, also a child of Destiny who had temporarily ceased to dream.

"Everything will be done to make you comfortable here, your highness," the Prince of Burgundy said. René wondered at the immobility of his face. "You had better make yourself as much at home as possible

because it seems that you will be here for some time."

René laughed at him.

"I appreciate the thought," he said. "But I should like to remind your highness that I am still alive and quite likely to get out of here to-morrow or next day—as soon, in fact as I care to make the attempt. My game with Burgundy is not yet played out."

Charles' gray eyes narrowed and his lips whitened. When he spoke his voice had a peculiar metallic ring.

"I was sure of that," he said. "I was sure we could count on you to go on raising hell if you were given an opportunity. That's why you are so thoroughly locked up."

"Well, let us for the sake of argument waive the possibility of escape. What of it? I am a duke and subject to ransom."

Charles shook his head.

"I'm afraid you won't find much consolation in that direction," he said. "My father was all for letting you out with a nice round fine and a warning. He is getting old and is losing that foresight that used to be his distinguishing characteristic. But I showed him something of your importance. I stood out when all the rest of the council wanted to call you a nincompoop and let it go at that. And I succeeded in getting a pretty good valuation put on your head. . . . 20,000 saluts d'or."

"For the love of God," breathed René. "Where does anybody think I am going to pick up 20,000 saluts d'or."

"It's all one to me whether you pick them up or not," Charles returned unemotionally. "As a matter of fact I agree with you that the sum is preposterous. That's why I suggested it." His voice was cold as his steely

eyes with an unplumbed menace in it as he leaned across the table to emphasize his words.

"The destiny of Burgundy is not going to be thwarted by any lute-playing half-wit," he said. "You stood in our path. You are out of it to stay. Burgundy is stronger than any kingdom on the face of the earth. Burgundy will be an empire. That is Destiny."

René yawned. It was difficult—but he yawned.

"I am glad to know that the issue is between the two of us," he said. "It makes things so simple. As I sit here I shall repeat over and over to myself that it is you who are keeping me here and then when I get out as I assuredly shall, my conscience will not stand in the way of my wringing your neck . . . as I undoubtedly will."

"We need not go into any academic discussions," replied Charles calmly. "You are going to stay here till you rot."

If there was a hearty guffaw at that it came from one of the Norns spinning out the threads of human Destiny.

.

Kings in motley rattle their hollow sceptres on the corners of Burgundy. Petty emperors dream great dreams. Ragged princesses set their eyes on distant but delectable thrones; and men at arms die in strange fields for causes that even Time will never get quite straight. Serious-minded schemers loll about wine-wet tables in strong castles and barter fates that they cannot own.

So, probably, do the wooden figures in a puppet show cloak themselves in a gilded dignity and imagine themselves the inspiring actors of impressive tragedy, unaware of the plot that lies in the mind of the hidden showman who pulls the strings.

The dukes of Burgundy, strong, swaggering, defiant, insolent, have the hopeful vision of a dawn in the East. A king of France dawdles in victory as he whimpered in defeat, a pathetic figure on a slippery throne. A king of Naples rides in fantastic pursuit of marsh fire and death. A duke of Lorraine sits in prison and studies Greek and Hebrew and painting and the zither. A king of England seeks a bride. A queen of Aragon, growing old, kneels by her bedside in Black Angers and prays that her sons may win back her lost heritage. Some peasants are starving in the war-blackened fields of the Meuse. But they, of course, are negligible.

Lorraine is gone—save for the walls of Nancy that still turn back the covetous marauders of Antoine and his allies. Out of Dijon comes a challenge to the world and the world hears as far as the palace of Sigismund, the Emperor, and trembles at its peril.

Burgundy is at last on its way. To-morrow the bones of petty kings will be swirling dust clouds in its path. Its lances spread across France from the Côte d'Or to the Alps. The Burgundian princes have sensed their Destiny. The world is theirs for the taking and they are but biding their time until the loot be richer. The inevitability of a Greek tragedy encompasses them.

Dire ghosts of men yet unborn who to-morrow will be dead in the furtherance of a great ambition stalk the streets of Morat and Granson and Peronne and Paris, wailing the fate that they cannot escape. And the witches who roam the mountains of the Morvan gaze into their unclean fires and laugh uproariously.

For the witches can see what the dukes cannot. They can look beyond the man-made certainties of blade and buckler and see other pictures in the twilight of the future. They can see a shirt of flame waiting

for a man who now sits in a Dijon tower with his head between his hands.

They can see an empire driving through an Alpine blizzard to a comic anticlimax in a mudhole. But they tell nothing of what they see, for little, unimportant man playing at God is far more amusing when he does not know how the piece is going to end.

The guard opened the door of René's chamber to admit a dusty messenger. The knight unexpectedly bent his knee and presented a scroll of parchment sealed in gold.

"I have the sad duty to inform you that your brother, Louis III of Anjou and King of Sicily and Naples, is dead," he said, "and that Queen Giovanna of Naples is also dead. I have the honor, Sire, to inform you that the council has confirmed your title as King of Naples and Sicily and of Jerusalem. . . ."

René stared at him uncomprehendingly—then burst into a wild laugh that brought the palace guards tumbling out into the courtyard below the tower. . . .

A king! René a king!

Oh, God! Did fate ever show such grim humor.

VII

DESTINY, seigneurs, is a lady, and being a lady is never in a hurry. René had forecast to Charles the Count of Charolais that he would be out of the Tour de Bar in a day or so. But as a matter of fact the Jacquemarts of Notre Dame had pounded out many thousands of hours on the great tower bell before a sentry, suddenly grown respectful, came to turn the key in the lock and help the captive

king pack up his books and his lute. But if Destiny dallies a bit she never loses her taste for the dramatic.

The Côte d'Or and the Isle of France and the border counties—and that, seigneurs, is a large part of the world—stood hushed when René, a bit older, a bit leaner and perhaps a bit more stooped, stepped from the tower gate into the palace yard. The setting sun made torches of a thousand upturned lances and spilled flame over a mass of metal such as he had not seen since Bulgneville. Hundreds of deep-set, black-ringed eyes stared out at him from beneath lifted visors. Captains of horse stood by their mounts motionless, still, gazing at him with a hate denied to men in the ranks. And of a sudden it came to René that these men were afraid of him. Afraid of him. Behind him the scarlet vale of Bulgneville—ahead of him the bloody heritage of the Anjous. . . . Poverty in his hand, death at his elbow, and they were afraid.

Here they stood—and where they stood, there stood Burgundy—to watch the release of a lone, unarmed troubadour. What did they expect him to do? Carry out his threat to wring the neck of Charles the Bold or merely to wreak his vengeance against the first Burgundian troops that might come to hand? As he thought of it he laughed. He laughed alone and the smooth wall of the ducal kitchens threw back the echoes without arousing any response in those who watched. These men at arms could not see the matter as he saw it. He suspected that their vision must be poor and that they were woefully lacking in a sense of humor. . . . The great trouble with all of Burgundy for that matter—no humor.

He stood for a long while looking at them with all his old devil-may-care insolence and gradually became aware of an almost incredible fact: Bent, weakened,

almost broken, he was emerging from prison a stronger man than he had been in his strength. He had suspected contempt in the gesture with which Burgundy, in response to sundry influences, had turned him loose. He realized now that Burgundy had felt safer preparing for the crisis at Bulgneville than it would feel until he had crossed the border into Lorraine. . . . Silly folks these Burgundians.

Cadaverous grooms brought him his stained sword in its battered scabbard and with elaborate ceremony dressed him in the black armor that no longer fitted him. Humming insects droned audibly over the mail-clad lancers. The bell of Notre Dame tolled the hour, and so hushed was the court that the squeaking of the joints of the Jacquemarts was as loud as a laugh in church. But these soldiers stood stiffly as copper castings as if unwilling to indicate by so much as a word or the movement of an eye that they might be party to this ceremonial.

René swung stiffly to his horse, wondering if he would still be able to ride. Still the iron caryatids stood immobile. He was well out through the gate before the clatter of mail inside the walls gave hint of life beneath the metal masquerade.

One lone knight rode out after him into the road and plodded along patiently at his left and a little to the rear. He too was silent and apparently not at all pleased with his job.

"Is there any reason why I have to leave by the back door?" René inquired. "I thank the boys for all the ceremony and what not but I feel that I ought to be allowed to say good-by to Duke Philippe and Count Charles."

His escort grunted.

"Out of town, both of them," he replied. "And

anyway you'll be just as well off if you take the short route toward Langres and forget the etiquette. You're in jolly good luck to be going at all the way I figure it."

"I noticed that your lads in the courtyard didn't seem very cordial."

"Cordial? I'll tell you something, Sire, they'd have been glad of a chance to hang you."

"What for?"

"General principles. . . . You know how it is with soldiers . . . Guess you've done some soldiering yourself—of a sort. I'm not saying I hold with their ideas, understand, but the idea has got around that you're going to make trouble. And they feel that after all the trouble the army went to getting you cooped up in the tower it would be only fair to the army to leave you cooped up, see . . . not have the army going to all the trouble of going after you again."

"Yes," admitted René, "I can see that there is sound psychology in that. They probably believe that I'm going out right now to raise troops and revenge myself. I told Charles once that I'd break up his silly empire and wring his neck. But it seems foolish now. I don't believe I harbor any resentment. I've had too much time to sit and think. And you won't understand me when I say it but I've come to the conclusion that fighting is a very dull business . . . No, I don't think I shall bother you any more. Life is too short."

And again the knight grunted.

"That won't go down, Sire," he said. "You and I and these louts we just left in the alley are all the same breed of cats. You've just got out of prison and you feel sort of philosophical and fed up. But after a while you won't remember how glad you are. You'll remember how sorry you were yesterday. And then I

suppose we'll all be meeting again some place to prove that our last decision was in error."

René smiled. A delicious bit of drollery, this—how delicious only he could know—only he whose shoulders were already aching with the weight of his armor and whose knees were cramping to the unfamiliar gait of a horse. They came to the fork where the road led to Tallant and the knight drew rein.

"I'm leaving you here," he said bluntly. "I was to guide you here and instruct you to take the left turning. A mile down the road you'll meet some of your hard-fighting, well-rested Lorrainers. But before that you'll meet somebody else."

He swung about and was gone leaving René alone in the road to ponder on his prospects.

The King of Jerusalem and the Two Sicilies began by slipping his sword from its scabbard and hefting it. No telling what might be ahead of him—an ambush probably. It would be quite like Burgundy to release him only to kill him. Such things were no novelty in warfare. It puzzled him that his Burgundian escort should have hurried away if there were really a murder in prospect, and then, on the other hand, there was no accounting for Burgundians.

He whistled softly to himself and put up his sword. He could wish for a little more strength in his right arm. Art and poetry had not done much to keep it in shape in the Tour de Bar. However, one must make use of the tools at hand and there was manifestly no time for suitable practice and exercise. He rode slowly forward toward where the road dipped downward through the sunset haze and disappeared into the forest.

He was aware presently of a figure that had detached itself from the woods and now stood in the middle of the highway—a slim figure for a warrior and too dull

a shadow to be in armor. As he came closer he saw that it was a woman and he recognized her. Yvette de Souigny came forward to meet him.

René dropped swiftly from his horse and bowed low, though not so low as to prevent his keeping an eye on the woods at either side of the road.

"What a pleasant surprise," he greeted her. "Who would have thought to find the lovely Yvette in Burgundy." She drew her white cloak up about her shoulders and looked at him for a long time before answering. René, gazing at her in frank appraisal, wondered why he found it so difficult to hate her. She was no longer the girl she had been. Her high coloring had faded a bit and the plumpness was gone from her cheeks, but maturity had given her a new charm of person and had taken nothing from her amorous eyes.

"Why don't you kill me, René?" she asked him shortly.

"I never gave the matter a thought," he told her with a fair approximation of the old gayety. "Life is so uneventful at best you know—I think I should dread to live in a world with you out of it."

"You will never forgive me, René . . ." The note in her voice was entirely new to him. Age had improved the woman's technique if possible. She was downright convincing.

"Long ago, my dear, I forgave you in advance for anything you might do," he replied. And he would have made a bow to suit the declaration but he was conscious of a crick in his back.

"I love you, René."

"Then I can only be thankful that you never set your mind to make a real good job of hating me."

"I mean it." Her eyes were half closed and he sensed that she was looking at him against a background

of memory. "I have always loved you—always since the night I tried to kill you. You won't believe me, of course. You never did . . . You have made me so miserable."

Two big tears formed in the corners of her eyes. René looked at them as he might have studied an amazing phenomenon—which indeed they were. He felt unaccountably ill at ease. Reason told him that he had no cause for remorse, and yet . . .

"If I have used you badly I apologize," he said. "Please don't cry about it."

"I don't know what kind of a woman I am," she went on brokenly. "Not a very good one I suspect."

René made no reply to that. He was candid by nature but also the gentleman. She wiped her eyes with a lace handkerchief and continued.

"I have loved you until I was no longer accountable for what I did and then I wanted to see you dead at my feet. You can guess that. But you can't guess how I've hated myself for it. I want you to know, René that your going away from here is none of my doing."

"I had suspected that."

"Oh why won't you understand me. At first I tried to have you released. I cajoled old Philippe until I was ready to drown myself rather than look at him again. I got the English to demand your release . . . And night after night I sat out there in the court and looked up at the light in your window."

"I'm afraid I don't quite follow you. First you wanted me free and then you wanted me kept in my cage. That's part of your charm and always was, Yvette—your capacity for paradox."

"It's more logical than it sounds. You came to Dijon a duke and now you are a king. After Bulgnecille you were a broken man—lonesome and unloved. You

might have listened to me if you were freed then. You might have remembered that once you kissed me. You would have gone back to Nancy and you'd have kept out of trouble. What are you going to do now?"

"There's no secret about that. I'm going to Naples and take a try at being a king. I have to if only to turn the kingdom over to Philippe to pay what's owing on my ransom."

"You will have to fight for your throne."

"I expect to. One always has to fight for a throne. Isabelle has been down there for several months and she writes me that Alfonso of Aragon has ambitions and also an army."

Yvette clasped her hands helplessly.

"The bloody heritage," she murmured. He nodded in silence. And suddenly she began to weep again.

"For God's sake don't go down there, René," she urged him. "No Anjou ever comes back alive from Naples. There's a curse on the place . . . Stay here and you can be an emperor."

René smiled once more.

"There's a bit of competition in that direction," he reminded her. "And in spite of your solicitude I feel that I shall be better off there—you know how it is—Alfonso, who does not love me, may wish to cut my throat, but he, I dare say, must lack some of the skill of those who love me."

"But I do love you, René. I do. I do."

"I have never doubted it, my love. Your affection has been one of the bright spots in an otherwise drab existence."

And this time, despite the crick in his back, he bowed low with a hand above his heart. When he looked at her again she had ceased to weep. She was quivering and her eyes had closed to black slits.

"You are laughing at me," she cried hoarsely. "You let me humiliate myself and you laugh. Bah, you are not worth spitting on. Go to Naples! Go to your sheep-faced Isabelle. And I shall pray to God that you rot with fever the day you land there."

She turned from him, picked up her long skirts and ran into the mists toward Dijon. René laboriously clambered back onto his horse and rode eastward into the forest.

At the edge of the woods he came upon his waiting escort from Lorraine. The men wept as they caught sight of him. They fought with one another to kiss his hand and Robert de Baudricourt could not find words of welcome but laughed hysterically and clapped a heavy iron paw repeatedly on the sore spot between his shoulders.

The Lorrainers were aware after a moment that René was attempting to speak. They pressed closer, avid for his words. It would be a poignant message, this, his greeting to Lorraine fraught with the wisdom that must have come of much thought in the weary hours of his imprisonment.

"Robert," said René as if he had parted from Baudricourt yesterday. "Robert, as I grow older I am convinced that all women are crazy"

VIII

THERE were no men in white armor riding into the morning sun at Nancy. The walls were battered and the parapet of the Porte de la Craffe was crumbling. A mist was slowly rising out of the marsh and the gargoyles of St. Evre were weeping,

weeping soiled tears onto the yellow flags under the buttresses.

Thousands of men, women, and children blocked the ruelles and pressed in upon the cavalcade in the Place des Ducs, hailing René as they had hailed him many years ago when he had returned from the wars of Jeanne Darc. The women cried at the sight of his thin, pale face. The men thrilled at the sight of his dented black armor. The dull radiance of it brought back the old days when René was accounted the finest swordsman in Europe—the days of the Duke Charles when the Nançois arms never returned from a field without victory.

René choked with emotion at this outburst from a people not generally given to demonstrations. He smiled and waved his hand as the arching gables magnified the shouts of acclaim to a roaring chorus. But for all the welcome he was unaccountably lonely—far more lonely than he had been in his cell at Dijon. The ghosts at Dijon had been strangers in which he had no interest. Through the Street of the Green Carpet he seemed to see before him the slim figure of Jeanne d'Arc on her white horse, the shy flights of Jehanne de Laval, the flaunting, passionate allurements of Yvette de Souigny, the lithe, quick stride of De Sampigny who had relied once too often on an ornate attack.

René turned to Robert de Buadicourt who rode at his side.

"I wish that my son Jean could be educated here in Nancy," he said. "This was always a school for the strong arm."

"Duke Charles was a very practical teacher," recalled Robert. "And you may admit without immodesty that he had excellent material."

Rene laughed at the Count's obvious sincerity.

"I am too old for compliment," he answered. "And I know what a mess I made of my talents. My hope in Jean may save me from myself. I see in him all that I had envisioned when I was a boy. He has a better brain than mine. A little more experience and he will make a real name for himself. . ."

Unconsciously he was visualizing old Boson and echoing the prophecy that had been impressed on his youthful mind that night by the fire.

"He will be a great man, Robert. The strong ones of Europe will be glad to claim his friendship. . ."

And then the voice of experience broke through the repetition of old Boson's horoscope, a minor overtone:

"And I suppose he will pay for his honors. . . . One pays for everything."

There was something missing in Nancy. Women still congregated in the ducal palace. Adventurers from Syria and Cathay and the borders of Spain still found amusement in the noise of the *salle des chevaliers*. The corridors and furnishings were as quiet as René remembered them. The shadow seemed never to have left that corner where little Jehanne de Laval had said good-by to him. A blue arabesque from a stained window marked where Yvette de Souigny and Raoul de Montfort had held their last affectionate conversation.

The black hangings and the gold candlesticks in Isabelle's room made him feel that she must be somewhere near by spinning out her golden hair. The great gaunt palace was unchanged—and yet it was all changed. Or was it that he was not the same man who had stepped out of this place overconfident of victory on the march to Bulgneville.

There were no children in the room adjoining Isabelle's. The nursery seemed deathlike in its quiet. It

reminded him that he had no children any more. Margaret was the bride of the English King. Yolande, the baby, was in Vaudemont under the training of a Vaudemont preparing for a marriage with a Vaudemont. His eyes were wet as he stepped out into the corridor. He wondered if he or any of them would ever see Nancy again.

Unlike Charles of Burgundy he lacked the gift of vision. He could not foresee battle lines drawn up in the driving sleet or a conqueror face down in the marsh under a shroud of ice.

René rode out of Lorraine and across Burgundy with the gossamer ghost of a girl in shining armor and the more tangible wraith of a dead love.

He was again René of the ready sword as he picked his way over the forest paths where once he had ridden that strange forced march to bring to Charles of France the eerie beautiful creature who was to save him and be killed for doing it. Jeanne's voice was in his ear as he moved in slow silence through the shadows, and she seemed to be as close to him now as she was in those other days when he had longed to take her in his arms and had not dared. She was no more ghostly now than she had been then. She seemed far more real than the nightmare memories of the lost field of Bulgneville and the barred windows of Dijon tower.

Here she had outwitted the Burgundian cavaliers. Here she had lain asleep beside him in the supreme confidence of innocence. Here she had told him of her visions—the voices that came out of the sunlight and the faces that she saw in the fire. Here she had murmured the prophecy that since had so frequently stirred his smiles: "You, too, are marked for Destiny,

my René. You, too, will be the savior of a people. And you, too, perhaps will know only sorrow as a reward."

He stared with sudden shock as a shaft of sunlight filtered down through the Gothic arches of the oaks. It was as if she had given him a sign. He strained his eyes through the scintillant dust pillar to glimpse a sight of her and he felt with a conviction that he knew to be ludicrous that she would be waiting for him at the turn of the road. . . .

And so at last he turned his face southward toward the Rhone and toward his kingdom.

He stopped only long enough to pay his respects ironically to his royal brother of France and to set his lance once more in its rest and win a joust or two in Touraine. . . . Little enough, that, to give unborn cartographers employment in correcting maps of the world. But, ah, seigneurs, only the great Boson could have linked together the trivialities that are the part of Destiny, and Boson, alas, was elsewhere.

René followed the Saône on its downward course, turned eastward, and journeyed over the slopes of the Morvan. So he came down at last into the valley of the Loire where the red-tipped spires of Tours rose into the sun.

It is said, seigneurs, that when the King of Naples and his dusty train rode under the tower of St. Martin's the jousts were forgotten. Contesting knights left their pavilions and made an impromptu arch with their lances beneath which he passed in triumph. Charles, ready and willing to forget that this was his foster brother whom he had neglected in an hour of need, came forth with his usual charming consistency to meet his distinguished guest.

It required no effort for him to forego the perquisites of etiquette. René was a king now, and if they met as king to king and man to man not even the most seasoned snob in the court of Tours could object.

René acquitted himself well in the tournament, which he entered as soon as he could borrow a fresh horse. His years of imprisonment told on him before the end of the jousting and he went down at the point of a Provençal champion's lance. But at sword play he easily proved that his blade was still the finest in France. He turned after the last mock duel toward the King's pavilion where stood a mite of a girl—she seemed scarcely more than a child—with a pert little face, flaming red hair, and laughing eyes, ready to present to him the prize he had won. He looked at her . . . then held out both his hands in smiling recognition . . . Jehanne de Laval . . . Little shy Jehanne grown up and dazzlingly beautiful. He realized that he had been a long time in prison. Up in the Morvan the creatures of darkness stirred their eerie fires and smiled at their own wisdom.

"Another red-head," observed a very young witch.

"When she and René met the Duke of Burgundy had a chill in Dijon," commented an elder sister. "He thinks he ate something that disagreed with him . . . But it's just his soul having a fit."

"She is so young, so small, to mark the doom of an empire," put in the younger harridan. "Like Jeanne Darc, don't you think?"

"Well, I should say not at all like Jeanne Darc," declared her sister. "But anyway she obeys her Destiny. . . ."

.

René looked for a long time into the girl's eyes, puzzled at what he saw there. He hardly noticed

the prize she handed him. . . . It was a metal rose with petals of beaten gold, the handiwork of Jacques Cœur in a period when the alchemy of depreciated currency had been a matter of no moment with him. The girl nervously disengaged her hand from René's double clasp, took back the rose, and hung it about his neck on a ribbon of red silk.

The sun made an aureole about her head and sifted through her flaming curls to make odd little high lights in her cheeks. Her fair skin was whiter than the ridiculously formal white robe that enveloped her. She had been a sprite before. As a woman she had a spirituelle quality such as René had seen only once before and then in a girl who heard angels and talked with God. For the moment it was as if his memory of Jeanne Darc had suddenly been remolded in ethereal flesh. . . . And though he never again saw Jehanne de Laval in quite the same setting he never forgot the vision.

"Don't you know me, my king," she was saying. "I am little Jehanne of Brittany who used to come visiting cousin Isabelle at Nancy."

"I knew you at once, my dear," he told her. "Though it is hard to believe that baby Jehanne has had time to become a beautiful woman."

"I did it very rapidly," she explained. "I wanted to grow up so that I could award prizes at tournaments and possibly be kissed by a king. I think I should like very much to be kissed by a king."

"A simple boon," he admitted, as he complied with her modest suggestion. "But, ah, child, you don't have to drop such hints to kings or anyone else."

She sighed happily.

"It will bring me good luck," she said. "Perhaps some day I shall marry a king. Who knows?"

"God forbid, child," prayed René fervently. And then they both laughed at the absurdity of Jehanne's ambition. It was natural that they should laugh, for Boson was long gone out into the blue, the witches of Morvan were hidden and silent in their hills, and nobody else in Europe had ever claimed a free-handed gift of prophecy.

IX

SEIGNEURS, whom Fate would cast down she must first pick up.

There was no better known man in the world than René, by Grace of God and fortune of the sword King of Jerusalem, the two Sicilies, Aragon, Valencia, Majorca, Sardinia and Corsica; Duke of Bar and Anjou and Lorraine and Calabria; Count of Provence, Forcalquier, Piedmont, Guise, Maine, Chailly, and Longjumeau; Prince of Gerona; Lord of Genoa; and Marquis of Pont à Mousson, when he left the court of Charles VII on his way to the promised land of Italy. The humanness of the Troubadour King made him a legendary creature like Clovis or Pepin the Short or those other monarchs who had been a bit rough but close to the people.

If he could have mobilized the well-wishers who made his progress down the Rhone a journey of triumph, he would have been able to conquer not only Naples but the rest of Italy and possibly parts of North Africa and Asia. Had floral garlands been gold he would have been the richest king since the late Midas. But no one thought to give him money—it would have been positively indecent to suggest such a thing to a king. And the warriors who

pledged him eternal fidelity as he passed through his new territories realized that it would have been casting reflections on his skill as a soldier had they offered to bear arms for him. Loyalty seems so much more disinterested if pledged at a distance.

So René landed at Naples, a perfect picture of a king, but a picture unaccompanied by any perfect picture of a king's army or a king's treasury.

The Neapolitan populace cheered him for three consecutive hours. Little girls strewed his path with roses. Beautiful women played with more or less skill on gilded harps and sang songs of praise in his honor. Nobles in velvet, palace officials round-shouldered under a weight of tinsel and gold braid, ornate generals whose troops were off somewhere fighting for men who could guarantee them three meals a day—all of these came forward with great magnificence and dignity to assure him of their eternal fidelity.

There came also many delegates chosen by the people to make mention of eternal fidelity and to present sets of resolutions commenting on his indubitable qualifications as a king. Then somehow it got noised abroad that King René had come into Naples with little more than the armor on his back—and that was a bit damaged.

"Where is your majesty's army?" inquired the Marshal di Stefano. "I should like to arrange for the billeting and similar matters with our newly appointed quartermaster."

"Army," repeated René. "I didn't bring any. I am quite content to use local talent. Your army will understand the topography of the country better than any strangers whom I might muster. And besides a

temporary shortage of funds made it impossible for me to charter sufficient transports."

"That makes it awkward," admitted the marshal, "doubly so because there isn't any local army—and if you haven't brought any money, there isn't any treasury."

"I knew there was a catch in this thing somewhere," commented René.

These matters somehow got to the ear of the people and fourteen nobles sent messengers with due promptness to avow eternal fidelity to Alfonso of Aragon.

However, René was not without resources, principal of which were a pleasant manner and a convincing tongue.

Michael Attendolo and Jacques de Caldora came into the capital with well equipped troops which they pledged to him, partly because of his graceful manners and partly because they suspected the good faith of certain strangers who had come to them offering gold but speaking Italian with a Burgundian accent. One Michelotto, who knew much about fighting but very little about the causes for which he fought, brought a thousand horse and wisely provided enough hay for the feed of the mounts while in garrison. The Carraccioli family, always considered eccentric, saw that there was going to be adventuring in or about Naples, and cantered up to the walls one day with a sizable troop bedecked in the white and blue trappings of Anjou.

All of these aids did not combine to make an army as popular conception of armies went, but René had learned from Jeanne Darc that great numbers of men are sometimes an incumbrance. With unexpected

agility he struck one fine summery afternoon and, greatly to the surprise of many who had sworn eternal fidelity to his service, captured Aquila. A number of soldiers, temporarily out of employment, allied themselves to him just for the lark of the thing, and before they realized it, had defeated an Aragonese squadron near Nola. A quick march brought them against the Castello Nouovo, a strong point in the defense of Naples, for years in the possession of Alfonso. That night the white-and-blue pennon was flapping over the main gate.

.

The Neapolitans held one of their periodic festivals and made some new vows of eternal fidelity. Mercenaries from all over the south of Italy flocked to the Castle St. Elmo for a great play of arms, and many of them stayed to see what was going to turn up. René had a way of creating a care-free atmosphere that compensated somehow for the uncertainty of the cuisine. . . . As for the absence of pay there was nothing particularly new in that.

The King next led his haphazard friends into the Abruzzi, enlarged his army slightly through the addition of inquisitive volunteers, and was so successful that it appeared for a time that he might remain king in spite of his orally energetic adherents. Then he struck into the farther Abruzzi and had turned his expedition into a parade through captured towns when treachery in the garrisons holding the western defenses of Naples brought Alfonso to the unprotected gates of the capital.



MIRA, the widow of Giuseppe the Miller, was hungry. It was a remarkable thing about hunger, she noted, that one never seemed to get over it with practice. Mira had been hungry these three months since Giuseppe got it into his head that he was an archer and went out to get himself shot at the Castello Nouovo. That is the way with men, never satisfied. The miller was always nourishing romantic impulses in his white-powdered breast, always picturing himself as a hero in white armor, half-praised by jealous knights, much sought by admiring dames. But Mira had known—and she had told Giuseppe time and again—that millers who thought they were military marvels usually contrived to die before their time.

So it had been with Giuseppe. He hadn't listened to the wife who spoke to him only for his own good. And now he was dead—probably unburied out there in the muck. The bins were empty and the hearth was cold. And Mira was hungry.

She told all these things to the sad-eyed lady in the gray cloak who had come fainting to her door only an hour ago and now sat at the empty table listening to her story with the sympathy of one in kindred misfortune. The sad-eyed lady's woes seemed to be the greater when one noticed that she was of the nobility and obviously used to the good things of life. Even now that she was in want her clothes still gave testimony to the importance of her former station.

"You might pawn your cloak," suggested Mira judiciously. "Surely someone would give you much gold for so fine a garment."

"Gold, yes," admitted the strange lady. "But who would give me bread for mere gold?"

"That is true," said the miller's widow rubbing her thin hands together. "Who would trade bread for gold in times like this?"

There were dismal sounds in the air . . . sounds that Mira had been hearing for so long that she scarcely gave ear to them save on occasions like this when they suggested anew the cause of her unhappiness . . . Hoof beats, the patrols making their incessant rounds, cavaliers drawn suddenly to some new point of defense by some new hoax, a continuous jangling din of tempered plate, a rumbling of culverins and serpentines, and a moaning, always a moaning, for there were scores like Mira in this dim old street, waiting to join the emaciated dead who had gone on as an advance guard for the legions of starvation.

"If my man could only be here he would do something for me," wailed Mira. "He wouldn't let me go hungry like this."

"What did he die for?" suddenly demanded the lady with the sad eyes. In her sudden emotion she betrayed peculiarity of speech that Mira had not noticed heretofore, the accent of a Neapolitan who has spent many years in a foreign country, perhaps—or maybe only the accent of one whose tongue is weakened by lack of food.

"What did he die for . . ." Mira repeated the words mechanically, then passionately. "Aye, what did he die for? I'd like to know that myself. He was a miller. What had he to do with a quarrel of kings?"

"Nothing, I suppose," replied the lady. "It seems a bit hard to be starving just because a knight from Anjou or Lorraine or somewhere wants to wear a

crown . . . and men die like as your man died without knowing why. It has always been that way in Naples. I wonder what patriotic excuse caused folks to go without their food when Belisarius took the town these seven hundred years gone . . .”

“Belisarius!” Mira turned suddenly and peered at her as intently as the flickering candle would allow. “Belisarius! What do you know of Belisarius?”

“Oh, the usual things, I suppose . . .” The lady’s voice was a bit tense for so casual a conversation. “He was Justinian’s general, wasn’t he? A fat old fool who died in disgrace.”

“And how did he take Naples? Tell me that.”

The gray cloak of the lady was no grayer than her face, but her smile seemed genuine.

“My dear girl, how should I know? It was more than seven hundred years ago and I merely look that old.”

Mira settled back in her chair once more.

“If you were able to end this slaughter and this suffering,” she asked, “would you do it?”

“Do you think I should hesitate?”

“But there might be reasons, my lady. King René might be a good king if he had the chance. Is there ever a time when treachery is justified?”

“Treachery is sometimes merely a harsh word applied to a good deed. From some points of view, I have committed acts of treachery many times myself. Once I offered love to a man, my dear, and he laughed at me. I have never hesitated to cause him trouble with any weapon that came to hand. I dare say he thinks that I have been treacherous. . . .”

“Ah, but lady,—the provocation. Your case is different. I have merely suffered physical discomfort. After all that is usual in war and it was no

fault of the King that Giuseppe got himself killed."

"You are starving . . . And why is René your king any more than Alfonso? Oh, if I were a man instead of a poor weak woman! If I could only battle my way to the gates and throw them open and let in these men who camp about the walls! Do you think I should hesitate? Do you think I should have the right to hesitate when by such an act I could end the war and save the lives of babies who will die before morning?"

"You say strange things, my lady." Mira's voice was scarcely more than a whisper. "It seems wrong, my lady, and yet, God knows, you may be right, and many people are starving . . ."

It was an hour later when the lady in the gray cloak met a soldier in a dark triangle where the Street of the Armorers emptied into the Place of the Cathedral.

"You were right," she said as she pressed a handful of coins into his mailed fist. "She knew . . . Her husband found the aqueduct of Belisarius when he was rebuilding his mill race just before he died. She is at the house of Annello the Conduit Maker and to-morrow. . . ."

"To-morrow I shall come to you, my sweetheart," he told her in a trembling voice. "To-morrow when the dangers of which you told me are ended, we shall go away somewhere—away from wars—and think of nothing but love?"

She kissed him passionately.

"To-morrow," she repeated. "To-morrow at the house of the caryatids in the Street of St. Giovanni."

Then she slipped from his arms and darted into the shadow. But she did not go to the Street of St. Gio-

vanni. She went to the house of Annello the Conduit Maker which was the length of the city away from the house of the caryatids.

XI

RENÉ, pacing the wall near the north gate, wondered at the activity in the camp of Alfonso. Men were moving among the tents, though it was after midnight. He could see archers in the massed light of the torches, and lance points in the artificial twilight beyond the fires.

It was a clear night, a phosphorescent blue save where Vesuvius cut a gash of ominous black among the stars and balanced its fan of flame against the sky. The misty purple in the foreground flowed from the white tents of Alfonso's camp into the colder blue of the bay. And soldiers were awake there, spreading out with their torches like a smoldering fire on a velour drapery.

René read the signs. There would be an attack before morning . . . But where? After all it did not make so much difference. His little garrison was well distributed with a reserve close by the north gate for a counterattack. It was somewhat unethical, of course, to fight in the dark, but after all one could not well insist upon too meticulous an observance of the chivalric code in a region where the desertion of armies was to be looked upon as a fortune of war. He would have a very good chance of beating the Aragonese if they would attack before the dawn could betray his lack of numbers. His contempt for Alfonso had not been diminished by the loss of the bulk of his troops. . . . And yet he was glad that Isabelle had sailed for France. . . .

About two o'clock in the morning there was a riot at the north gate. René left his observation post without haste. This presaged the beginning of the fight, he judged. And yet, whatever the skirmish was it could not be serious. For out there in the veil of the mist the squares of armor remained in battle formation, but motionless—icelike and mysterious.

"Probably some villager caught trying to demonstrate his eternal fidelity," he told Otho Carraccioli, who joined him as he started for the tower that flanked the gate. "Two or three men could create a wild disturbance on a night like this."

Carroccioli yawned. His estimate of the situation had been similar. They entered the tourelle and followed the unseen stairs down through the black to the street, where they emerged to find themselves thrust into a desperate fight for their lives.

This was no mere mob attack, no mere sedition of the hungry butchers and bakers. The open space before the gate was ablaze with torches, and the cobbles crashed to the tread of strange soldiery—men whose flashing sword arms were marked with bands in the red and gold of Aragon.

How they had come there René did not know. There was no time to inquire. Three of the enemy with dripping swords that attested their ability were rushing toward him. René lost all curiosity in the thrill that came to him as he put his back to the wall and raised his blade to parry the first thrust.

There was no lack of light. There were torches everywhere, in the crevices in the walls, in the hands of blank-faced squires, and spilled over the corpses in the street. The Aragonese were going at their work blunderingly, openly and thoroughly. So René had at

least that much in his favor as he picked a joint in the armor of his first foeman and spitted him through the breast.

The second man wore a suit of coppery plate that glowed dull red. René's first stroke dented the cuirasse. The soldier parried for a thrust and with rare joy the King drove beneath the guard with a full arm swing. The point of the heavy steel plowed deeply into the softer metal, broke the fastenings of the lower plate and ripped a path through soggy flesh. The victim looked startled, dropped his sword and lifted the dangling metal scales, less red, now, by reason of the deeper crimson that was flowing over them.

"Look at my gear," he cried in a fretful tone. "It's all spoiled."

The remaining soldier advanced more warily, but not so warily that he failed to take a sidelong glance at the man in copper armor whose knees were beginning to sag.

"I told you not to wear that junk out to-night," he commented. "You wouldn't take my advice, an' now look what you got. Plumb in the guts!"

"Pietro Collona owes me a salut d'or," replied the man in copper. "And I won greasy Tonio's horse . . . Get it!"

"Fine chance," scoffed the warrior.

The copper armor collapsed, a pile of wreckage on the flags. And a man died.

Otho Carraccioli was soon separated from René. His big two-handed sword kept a space clear in front of him. But Angevine troopers, hurled back by the crush at the gate, crowded him on one side and he was thrust irresistibly away from the tower.

His sword was flashing like a particularly brilliant

and appropriate halo as friend and foe closed in about him. That was the last René saw of him.

The King was a bit exasperated at the caution shown by his latest assailant. What a fool to attempt fancy swordsmanship at a time like this! René fainted. The Aragonese fell back surprised at the suddenness of the movement, and his eyes for a single instant swerved from their task. Another fang leaped out at him and a point took him in the throat through the lower hinge of his visor.

René felt the exultation of victory . . . After all, this was not so bad a finish for a reign. If he had to die he would die like a king—a king who had given a jolly good account of himself, too.

For a moment the fighting passed him in an eddy of iron and blood, and he stood alert for a new opponent. Then came a crash! The Aragonese had come up to the gate. Windlasses were creaking. Chains were jangling. The portcullis was rising. The drawbridge was dropping across the moat with a wild shrieking of pulleys and gears.

René could not see the fields beyond the town. But the scene was vivid in his mind . . . The great icy squares of armor cracking into changeable arabesques as the white armies came on like ghosts through the fog. . . . Frigid figures, dripping moonlight, moving on cumberously but certainly toward Death. . . . Death. . . .

From beyond the gate arose the cry of Aragon, lusty, victorious. . . . There would be no stopping this avalanche. In five minutes Alfonso's men would be pouring over the walls on all sides. The reserve could not have survived the mysterious attack from within.

There was no garrison left to man the parapets. René saw a black horse bulk suddenly through the

milling bodies at the arch . . . then another horse and another. The fight was already over. He retreated swiftly along the wall and then into a ruelle that passed by the mint and gave into the plaza of the palace. Fighting was one thing; another period of captivity—this time in the gentle hands of Aragon—was something else.

But he could not pick a course free from the battling mobs which seemed to be ranging the entire north end of the town. He was set upon from the rear by a noisy band which he eluded by a quick dash to the left through a covered passage. There were steps behind him, and persistent jingle of mail. But he retreated still more rapidly, choosing to do his fighting in a place where he could get more elbow room.

The winding passage debouched into an alley at the end of which the spire of the cathedral wedged into the sky. But there were troops moving in the dim light ahead, and the passage behind him contained other dangers beside the mysterious wearer of the whispering chain. There was a doorway to the right and he stepped into it, prepared to dispatch the man who stalked him before worrying about the opposition that stood in his path. Action came with flashing suddenness. The soldiers had sighted him for a brief moment as he crossed a streak of light slanting through a broken shutter. They did not wait his approach. The man who was stealing along the passage and the half-dozen cutthroats of Alfonso of Aragon reached him simultaneously.

For some reason, however, the man in the passageway failed to take advantage of so excellent an opportunity to kill a king. Instead he rushed at the Aragonese swinging a two-handed sword with a tech-

nique that seemed as familiar to René as it was alien to his foes. He split open a casque and a skull at the first stroke. But after that there was no accounting for details of damage.

And so they fought there, seigneurs, weaving weird tapestries in the light on the blackness of the alley, their mailed bodies flashing like shuttles under the warp and woof of sparking swords.

René, winded, leaned wearily against the jamb of the door. The street was an abbatoir. Men, how many he did not know, lay dead on the cobbles. Two or three others had taken flight. The mailed stranger who had arrived so opportunely was gasping out his soul on the doorstep of a hairdresser's house . . . Pretty irony!

The King knelt over him and tried vainly to stanch the blood that flowed from a jagged rip over his heart. The broken shutter across the street was timidly pushed open and the beam of a lamp widened to a yellow band. It fell on the open visor of the dying knight and illumined his face.

René started as if a hand had clutched his throat.

He felt that fatigue and sudden light and the night's hysteria had taken his senses. For this man could not by any chance be the man that he undoubtedly was. . . . It must be all a delirium—a hoax of a weary mind.

The long thin nose, the thin lips, purpling but still twisted into a cynical smile . . . these belonged to Raoul de Montfort.

. . . Raoul opened his eyes once before he died.

"I'm sorry for Bulgneville, René," he said. "I have tried to pay the score, but nothing ever turned out right for me. . . . Yvette was here."

"I had suspected that," said René as he clasped the hand outstretched toward him.

"I suppose I am going to have a tough time of it out there," replied De Montfort. "Everything is wrong. I shall be pleasantly surprised if Death proves to be any exception. . . ." And so he died.

René's way was clear to the Château d'Oeuf and he reached it without further incident while the troops of Alfonso of Aragon streamed through the city.

Toward morning a messenger came to his tower to report that the Count Sforza had been beaten while attempting to reach Naples with three thousand horse.

"The garrison is wiped out," he said. "Some three hundred Aragonese got into the city through the old aqueduct that runs under the walls."

"For the love of God!" exclaimed René. "I thought that had caved in centuries ago. Why didn't somebody tell me? . . . Why? . . ."

He threw up his hands in a gesture of helplessness and laughed at the sardonic jest of a hand-lettered calendar that lay on the table. . . . For René knew, as did every school child in Naples, that Belisarius had broken into Naples through that same tunnel several hundred years before. . . .

And so, seigneurs, King René was forced to dismiss further speculation concerning the eternal fidelity of Naples and set sail for Provence. He made one stop on the way. He visited Pope Eugene. But the Pope's arms were employed at Florence and he demurred at undertaking an expedition. However he gave to René the official investiture of the kingdom he had just lost. He was so serious and kind that René tried hard not to laugh.

XII

IT was good to be in Provence. The Provençals, noted for their humor, made no vows of eternal fidelity. But somehow life in their company promised to be enjoyable and probably more permanent than a reign in the gaudy phantasmagoria of Naples.

Isabelle never quite forgave René for the loss of his crown, although she bore her afflictions with all the grace of a true queen. Everybody said so, particularly those who never before had seen a queen in the act of bearing up nobly under her afflictions. She was a splendid figure of a woman, they said—so like her mother—so calm and dignified in her adversity. But her improving eyes frequently found those of her husband—at the moments when she was not guarding her emotions, of course—and her sigh of resignation, perfect as any connoisseur in sighs could have wished, did not contribute any to the happiness of their married life.

And then she fell ill. She did not complain of that either—but somehow, wherever Isabelle went, folks knew that she was ill and likely to die at any moment. They shared her grief and marveled at her saintly endurance.

There were many nobles in Provence quite free with their criticism of René for his neglect of her. He was constantly painting church windows or playing his lute or writing treatises on the exemplary life—especially he was writing treatises on the exemplary life, for he found it interesting to envision the existence he might have led had he been less thoroughly occupied in leading a different one. Of course Isabelle did not care for such things. She was serious minded as a queen should be. She found much to do in company with

her women and declined to be annoyed by René's importunities. In that respect and otherwise she conducted herself so that life at Aix and Tarascon was quite the same as it had been at Nancy, except that the weather was warmer in winter.

There were days and days like that, and months and months—dull, anæsthetic days through which René moved like an automaton. Isabelle's illness became an accepted fact like the mistral or the peculiar taste of Rhone wines, and so he was surprised one day when a handmaiden came into his library to tell him that her majesty had taken a turn for the worse. He laid down his paint brushes and followed the girl to Isabelle's chamber.

The Queen lay on her back beneath a black-and-gold coverlet and her golden hair—golden still, despite sorrow and the passing years—made a fantastic aureole on her black pillow. She smiled as René entered and weakly held up her hands.

Impulsively he stooped and kissed her. He felt as if he were embracing a woman he had never known. And he knew instinctively that he was kissing lips soon to be denied him.

"I knew you would come," she said.

"Why shouldn't I?" he asked astonished. "Didn't you send for me? Haven't I always come when you sent for me?"

"Yes," she admitted weakly. "I knew you would come. But then I thought you mightn't—just this once. And I was afraid, René. I thank God that you are here . . ."

He sat down on a stool close to the bedside and took her hand in his. He noticed that her flesh was cold.

"This time I am going, René," she said. "And I should like you to know that I forgive you for having

left me to follow Jeanne Darc, and for your failing to take my advice in Naples, and for neglecting me . . .”

René flushed, then noticed that her voice was coming from a great distance and that there was sincerity in it. . . . Isabelle really believed these things . . .

“Yes, dear,” he answered, pressing her hands.

“And I wish you to know that I love you, René. I have always loved you—even when I thought I didn’t. You had none of the instincts of a husband and I tried to make you feel the serious obligations of the married state. I tried to show you that marriage was a holy thing and that love was selfish. . . . But I know that love is a holy thing, too . . . I found it out too late, dear . . . And so I lost you . . . I lost you here under our own roof and there is no unhappiness greater than life with the ghost of love . . .”

“Hush, dear,” said René. “To-morrow you will be feeling better and we shall go out and walk in the rose garden and start all over again.”

She shook her head.

“There isn’t going to be any to-morrow, René. I’m going. And the pity of it is I can’t see how Heaven will be a happy place without you. . . . Kiss me again, dear . . .”

He clasped her frail body in his arms and he felt a wild panic at the look in her eyes. After all these years he was holding the Lady of the Firelight close to his breast. She had always been near him and he had not known . . . And presently the last ember would be gray ashes.

For a moment she lay content. Then she whispered to him.

“Put out the lights, René. I wish to see Nancy again and the soldiers in white armor riding through

the Porte de la Craffe. The mists are rising, René. The soldiers are coming home with God's sunlight at their backs. The flags are flying and the people are cheering. . . . They are cheering for you, my lover. . . ."

And so, seigneurs, died Isabelle the Pride of Lorraine, a chaste wife, a loyal mother, a brave queen, and for all that a woman who should never have forgotten that she was a woman.

.

In Hesdin Yvette de Souigny heard the news, looked into her mirror, and wept . . . but not for Isabelle of Lorraine.

.

In Black Angers Jehanne de Laval heard the news, looked into her mirror, and smiled, for all that she felt a personal loss in Isabelle's passing.

Book Three

Poverty

I

RENÉ looked at Black Angers through the eyes of a stranger. The slate-faced buildings, the dark flags of the streets, the bold black outline of spire and gable against the sky, were quite as they had been when he had played in the rose garden with Marie of Anjou and Charles of France. There were old names over the shops and inns which themselves could not have looked much older. The white puzzles of masonry laid along the top of the walls when Yolande of Aragon repaired the fortifications remained there, a monument to her foresight. And yet the Angers that René had known was gone. The sundry and divers plagues and the wars and an occasional natural death had killed off many a good man. The children had grown up and out of memory. And Time had allowed the aged to slip through weakening fingers. These people whose faces were piled like pyramids of stone cannon balls in the windows, these shopkeepers who stood under the arches of their Romanesque shops to cheer his homecoming—all strange. He marveled that they spoke his own tongue.

He turned to Etienne of Provence who rode at his side.

"Towns are like rivers," he said. "Waters run on and are gone but rivers remain forever. This is still Angers and of course I know that it really isn't Angers at all—for the people who were in it have gone their ways."

"Looks like a pretty fair town to me," replied Etienne who was not coming home and therefore was little inclined to sentimentality. "Of course the buildings are higher in Arles . . ." This by way of hasty addition lest he should be suspected of disloyalty to the South. "At Arles there is the Roman arena, which, you must admit, is a marvel more worthy of attention than any of the modern masonry which they exhibit up here. It is six thousand paces in diameter and was designed to seat a hundred thousand spectators. Arles has the finest harbor in the South. It is the grain market of Europe. The women of Arles are the most beautiful in the universe, God bless 'em. Our population is increasings by leaps and bounds, because of our unexcelled business opportunities and healthful climate. Our homes are the envy of Languedoc, not to mention other places. Two thousand ships carry our flag over the seven seas—almost three hundred per sea. Last year alone we spent one hundred and twenty thousand saluts d'or for wharfage improvements . . . The modesty of our male population . . ."

"The thing I like about you most, Etienne," broke in René, "Is that you are so jolly and original. I have been in Arles. Why practice your speech on me?"

Etienne shrugged and sighed.

"If a man who has been in Arles isn't just the man to appreciate a description of its beauties, who is?" he inquired argumentatively. But René had ceased to be concerned with Provence and its wonders. The years had gone from him and vivid creatures of memory were strewing burnished gold over the drab reaches of Black Angers.

It was not only Angers that was changed. It was also René—and all the rest of France. Charles VII

was dead. The weakling Prince was now a sainted memory. "Charles the Victorious," they were calling him with straight faces even in the presence of those who remembered that Jeanne Darc had died unransomed. Charles had starved himself to death for fear of being poisoned. He had not been poisoned and thus his death had created a great furore as demonstrating the superiority of mind over matter.

Louis, who had succeeded him as the eleventh monarch of that name, was developing an entirely new system of pacification by arranging wars between his friends, thus keeping occupied the swords that might have made trouble for France.

Charles the Bold was now Duke of Burgundy, an emperor in everything but title. Flanders with its gold and textile industries gave him immense wealth. The Côte d'Or furnished him with billeting space for thousands of mercenaries imported "for purposes of defense" or picked up second hand from the little wars that Louis XI was stirring up so busily and cheerily. Lorraine was still wedged in between the two halves of Burgundy and the Destiny of the Valois, long delayed, seemed close at hand. To-morrow or next day there would be a war to determine whether or not vassals might safely be stronger than their masters.

René's daughter Margaret as the consort of Henry VI of England was aware of the heritage of her house as the roses of Lancaster and York were taking root in crimsoned battlefields. René's son Jean was in Spain, fighting for the Aragonese inheritance of Queen Yolande. Jeanne Darc's war that was to have ended war seemed to have failed temporarily at least in its effect.

René stepped into the *salle des chevaliers* and was

divested of a suit of chain mail that he had worn merely as a protection against the tax-collection systems then in vogue on the edges of France. He found it a bit more homelike in the cathedral gloom of the ancient hall. The armor standing racked about the walls was like a ghostly rank of silver men—a marvel to him now as it had been in his childhood.

"The men who built this castle did a good job of it," observed Etienne. "Now, in Arles . . ."

He stopped short as a girl in a blue frock, over which curling, coppery hair fell to make a whimsical brocade, danced into the room in pursuit of an ungainly brown dog. Her interest in the romping pet ended when she caught sight of René. She halted with the approved foot movement of the ballets, made a little tableau entitled "Maiden Dismayed at Her Own Unseemly Conduct in Company," curtsied and laughed.

"Good morning," she greeted cheerily.

"Good morning, my dear," replied René without looking at her. "You are very beautiful this morning, and your eyes—" The words came mechanically as he gave his attention to a broken link in his mail. "I'll have to have it welded," he observed to Etienne. "I thought it could be pinched back into place . . ." He glanced momentarily at the girl who stood awaiting the rest of his optical criticism. She was in the shadows now and he could barely make out the contours of her face—although even so there seemed to be something familiar about her.

"Who are you, my dear?" he inquired. "You will pardon my surprise, but there used to be a rule forbidding the men of this house the sweet privilege of seeing ladies in this room . . ."

"You certainly are uncomplimentary," said the visitor

with a toss of her head. "I am Jehanne de Laval and I think rules are ridiculous."

René dropped the armor to the floor and strode toward her. The vision once more. There was no sun here to illumine her copper hair or to light the fires in her pale cheeks. But memory supplied the deficiency. . . . He had not been mistaken. Jeanne of Domremy was alive once more in this girl. There was a mist in his eyes as he took her gently by the hand and led her out of the shadow.

"Little Jehanne!" he exclaimed. "And more charming than ever! Ah, we are getting older, my dear."

"You may be, your majesty," she admitted with a mischievous smile. "But I'm not. I quit growing old on my last birthday and now I shall be young and happy until I die. It is an ideal arrangement. I can't see why nobody ever thought of it before."

"And you will stop having birthdays?"

"Of course not. I get many presents on my birthdays. Birthdays are quite a festival. But I shall celebrate my birthdays as glad reminders of what a great occasion it was for the world when I was born . . . not as leaves on a calendar."

"And what is to be your permanent and private age, my dear?"

"Twenty-one, my love . . . And that's exactly what it is. And you haven't kissed me and I put on this new gown just to please you."

"One hesitates to kiss young ladies twenty-one years old merely because one has kissed them when they were eight or ten or twelve."

"Well, as between being twenty-one and being kissed, I am willing to drop another few years. They mean nothing to me."

She raised her lips, and of course René kissed her.

He was so old in his mental processes that the creak of his armor always made him feel that his bones, too, needed lubricant. But he had lost none of his eye for art.

Jehanne answered his salute by wrapping both her thin arms around his neck and sighing ecstatically in his ear.

"You can't imagine how lonesome I have been without you," she declared with a perfect simulation of passion. "You are the only king who ever kissed me except Charles and Louis and they don't count. And all these years you have been off subduing the Neapolitans and never giving poor little me a thought. Really I think I shall have to marry you just to keep you at home."

"Well, you might do worse," admitted René, readily responding to her mood. "However, you would be likely to find your duties as Queen of Naples a bit arduous—especially with no throne to sit on and no crown worth mentioning."

"I'll talk of that later, my love," she observed airily. "You should be ashamed of yourself, keeping me from the important things I have to do . . ." Then she curtsied and ran away, a shimmer of red hair over a rush of blue. The dog leaped up joyously and took after her. Etienne stood staring. He had seen beautiful women in Arles—in fact he was about to mention them to René—but he had never seen one quite like this.

"Where is there another woman like that?" he asked without taking his eyes from the door.

"I don't know," answered René in a more matter-of-fact tone. "It may be that one like her is enough for the world at any one time. I strongly suspect that I have met her frequently under other names. . . ."



RENÉ wondered at the lonesomeness that had come to him with Isabelle's death. He had thought the loneliness of a poorly balanced married life a suffering incapable of increase. But he was still lonely with all the old despairing helplessness and unaccountably he missed Isabelle. He had grown used to her demands in the years they had spent together and freedom was not without its price. He knew that as time went on he would forget the unhappiness of their domestic life, but he would always remember her last kiss. . . .

The brightness of Jehanne de Laval he found to be an enlivening influence in Black Angers. Her bantering suggestion that he marry her and take her troubadouring over the countryside amused him. No one could have accused Jehanne of harboring a serious thought. But had he found her company less interesting he might have noticed that she gave him a great deal of her time.

She told him much about herself with a humorous manner that made the fictional passages appear innocent enough and gave to the whole narrative an air of sincerity and truth.

Jehanne seemed bound by none of the conventions of the ducal court. The duennas might administer the proprieties for others but not for her. She had that air of innocence which is acquired only with much practice, and her laughter rescued her from many an awkward situation.

René was never surprised to meet her when walking or riding in the streets, in the countryside beyond the walls, or in the rose garden. He felt a bit flattered

that she chose his companionship instead of that of the disgruntled gallants who constantly sought her smile. She was everywhere and that saved him the trouble of looking for her—had he chosen to look. Surely there could be no harm in it. She was so young, and he—it seemed that France had been young when he was born.

"Some of the old hens are talking about me," she told him one day when they chanced to meet on the lower terrace of the Bishop's garden. "They say I am trying to trap you into matrimony. Can you imagine anything more silly?"

"It is preposterous, isn't it," agreed René. "Good companions such as we are seldom marry. Maybe its because they see too much of each other."

"That's not exactly a compliment," she answered dubiously. "But I suppose you're right about the effect, whatever may be the cause. I like you better every day. But of course I shouldn't think of marrying you."

"No?" inquired René.

"No!" said Jehanne.

They were silent for a while.

"I have lived a peculiar life," she told him ingenuously. "I am not like other girls."

"No girl is," agreed René.

"That shows how much you know about it," she retorted. "But it is certainly true in my case. I never had any home life to speak of. The De Laval men-folk were always fighting with somebody or other in Brittany and the house was always filled with female relatives who didn't like me. They were jealous cats and poor company. They treated me as a nuisance and I suppose I really was. The dear things were so proper—at least in public—and I was a scandal all the time.

"I knew every man, woman and child in our town. But you know how it is: The townsfolk were never very cordial because they were always afraid that a detail of the guard might be sent over some night to remove them if they were suspected of encouraging me in what my aunts called my wild ways. So I have been lonesome. Nobody was ever interested in music or the arts around our house. They always wanted to teach me knitting when I wanted to write poetry. I never met a soul who understood me—until you came, René."

"You seem to have been fairly happy in your loneliness."

"Why not keep a smiling face?" she replied. "Nobody cares to hear about the troubles of somebody else. I don't suppose I should be bothering you with mine. You have had a life full of adventure and romance. Naturally you can't understand what it means to be lonely."

"Who knows? Perhaps I do understand."

"You are good enough to say so . . . You are always kind. That's why I'm unmaidenly enough to run around after you and give the gossips a chance to talk. As if I had any intention of marrying you."

She turned her head but not before René had glimpsed two amazing tears wending a haphazard course from her smiling eyes where they had no business to be. He took her impudent little face in his hands and raised it toward him. She seemed frightened and the laughter had gone from her bright lips. A moment later she was in his arms, her wet cheek against his, her body trembling. It seemed to René that he must have clasped her suddenly. And yet he knew he had not.

Despite what he knew about the technique in such matters he was strangely content. The warmth of her

trembling body close to his, the brushing of her hair against his cheek had banished in one instant that sense of loneliness that had been his since first he could remember.

He was under no illusions. He knew that when he looked at Jehanne it was through a gazing crystal of memory. He knew that though she reminded him of La Pucelle she was not even remotely The Maid whom he had followed through the starlight. But if one cannot recapture a beautiful vision perhaps it is just as well to be satisfied with the next best thing . . . And he felt strangely content.

"I love you, René," she was whispering. "I shall always love you . . . forever . . . forever . . . forever. . . ."

.

René d'Anjou, who had known many women and who could read the book of female strategy with uncanny facility, married Jehanne de Laval.

Why? Who knows? Perhaps it was as he suspected because she looked something like The Maid. Probably because she wanted to marry him, which is reason enough for most marriages. René who had known many women was, after all, René the Romanticist questing for happiness with a brave heart and a golden lance, and looking at the world with the memory of Jeanne Darc in his mind and the firelight in his eyes.

Jehanne was a lady of considerable variety and for a time at least they were as happy as most couples.

Yvette de Souigny sat staring into the dying fire in the great empty hall at Metz with a letter in her lap. Across the hearth her sister Marie was knitting and on the floor at Marie's feet a baby played. Yvette

shuddered, though the room was warm. She went suddenly white and swayed forward. Marie, frightened, went to her.

"Are you ill, Yvette?"

The woman shook her head.

"It is nothing," she said. "Nothing I should not have been prepared for . . . I feared to open this letter because I knew what was in it . . . René d'Anjou is married again."

"René . . . René . . . I remember him . . . That nice boy who was here the day Dubois tried to have you hung. He said a lovely prayer for you."

"I was born a fool, Marie. I love him more than anything in this world or the next . . . But I have lost him because I never could understand him."

"It's just as well," said the practical Marie. "I know how you feel about it but you haven't seen him for years. The shock will pass. It's probably mostly surprise that you love him when you thought you had forgotten. I felt that way about Henri when my baby came."

"It isn't that," murmured Yvette hopelessly. "I can understand why I still love him. I knew I loved him. But I can't understand why I am unable to hate him. I want to hate him and all I can do is feel sorry for myself."

"Well, that's logical, too," commented Marie.



OVER a wine-stained table in the Tête Noir at Autun, Charles the Bold of Burgundy and René of Bar, Anjou, and other places, studied one another with mutual respect. Each knew the other for a

man and there was basis enough for the appraisal. The meeting itself marked the courage of each of them, for it is dangerous, seigneurs, to go adventuring too far from one's own troops. René had no troops and the army of Charles was at Dijon.

Autun was very nearly neutral ground between Burgundy and Touraine and therefore they had arranged to forget caution and confer here on matters of common concern.

Charles had not stepped out of his haughty arrogance when he became Duke of Burgundy. His eyes narrowed as they met René's. He seemed to be recalling the forecast he had made when the King of Naples rode away from Dijon.

"You are looking well, Charles," René told him as he seated himself. "And I can assure you, fortunately, that I am in much better health than I was when we last met. I have been hearing remarkable things about you since my return from Naples." Charles grunted.

"I have been doing fairly well," he admitted without boastfulness. "I am going to do better. That is why I wanted to see you. There is no use beating about the bush. You and I understand each other. You don't like me. I don't like you. So it will spare time and temper if we get to the point. What do you intend to do about Lorraine?"

"I hadn't given it much thought, Charles." René's manner was airily unconcerned, but his face was betraying signs of a storm. "However, I can tell you one thing, my boy. The Vaudemonts aren't going to get it."

Charles started from his chair with his hand on his sword hilt. René paid no attention to him and he sat down again.

"My daughter Yolande married young Ferry of

Vaudemont. It was a riotous joke on the poor simpletons who fought at Bulgneville. Antoine assured me that he was willing to remit my ransom should I allow the duchy to pass to the children of Yolande and Ferry. You know that.

"But once Yolande was married to his son he decided that he might as well have Lorraine and the twenty thousand saluts d'or, too. It was only an unwitting verbal agreement, so I seemed to be out on a limb.

"And now, just between us, I have abdicated the crown of Lorraine in favor of my son Jean who is now trying to make Aragon safe for the Anjous. He is as keen a boy as you'll find in these parts. If you care to fight him for Lorraine you'd better find a good pretext, for he stands very well with the wholly German Empire and possibly could get some help from Louis XI."

"Louis!" scoffed Charles. "Do you really think that crook would help anybody? Let me tell you something. Burgundy is marked for empire and if the poor fools who hold fiefs could only see it, their place is with Burgundy. If Louis of France lives another twenty years the glorious liberties of feudalism for which our fathers fought and bled are going to be sacrificed to the ambitions of an unscrupulous king. Even now there are only two armies in this part of Europe—mine and the gendarmerie of France. What do you owe Louis? To-morrow he will cut your throat. Join my cause and I'll put you back on the throne of Naples in a year."

René shook his head.

"You are probably right about Louis," he admitted. "He has no more conscience than a Burgundian or a Vaudemont. But what do I care? You probably will

find an emperor's closed arch a bit uncomfortable. I was a king, you know. I gave the business a fair trial. And I assure you I am all through with bearing arms for buncombe—French or Burgundian. An alliance with you wouldn't interest me. Your sainted father kept me busy during most of the best years of my life and I suspect that you did me more damage in Italy than all the traitors who fought by the side of Alfonso of Aragon."

"Your speech is hardly circumspect."

"It doesn't need to be. I am no greater enemy of yours for telling you about it. A candid understanding won't hurt either of us."

"True enough. As an enemy I can manage to live on the same continent with you. And it might be a nuisance having you for a friend. But I'll give you one word of free advice. Don't trust Louis. He'll get your shirt."

"Ho hum!" sighed René. "You seem to be worried about that a great deal more than I am. However, I'll take the advice for what it's worth. Give my regards to Vaudemont and tell him I hope he breaks his leg."

They arose stiffly and departed. No one in the inn suspected the identity of these two lean, brown chieftains. None could have guessed the effect that this conference might have on the destinies of the world.

IV

THEN Louis XI took pains to prove Charles the Bold to have been a truthful prophet.

One fine August morning a green rank of Scotch archers gave color to the brown forests on the

slopes about Angers and the mail of French cavaliers added new brilliance to the early sunlight.

Jehanne saw them from her window and hastily aroused René. He looked at the threatening panoply with little show of concern.

"So it's the French," he commented critically. "They have taken a leaf from the tactics of the English, posting their bowmen that way. But they have no originality in disposing their bombards. That formation is fine for defense, but it gets the cavalry and artillery all tangled up in an attack."

Jehanne stared at him.

"But what does it mean?" she demanded hysterically. "What are they doing here?"

"It means that Louis, our liege lord and all that sort of rot, is about to seize Anjou, my dear. He never fights his enemies. He lets them fight themselves. But he is not so particular about his friends. . . . Well, get dressed, my love. You'll catch your death standing at that window as you are. Pack what things you may care to take on a long journey and if you see my lute while you're at it, let me know. We'll have to get out of here in a hurry."

Jehanne started to cry excitedly.

"But I don't want to go away," she protested. "I don't want to have to get dressed just because King Louis sends an army here at this hour of the morning. And if I go away I'll miss my breakfast."

"If you stay here you may find yourself getting free meals from Louis in some damp tower in Paris. For my part I prefer freedom, even with a little hunger, in Provence."

She stamped her bare foot on the tile floor and then cried out indignantly at the pain of it.

"What sort of a man are you?" she demanded.

"Are you willing to let him take your birthright away from you without a fight? René of Anjou, King of Naples—the brave warrior who ran away! A fine thing to tell our children about, isn't it?"

"René the corpse, without any of the children you have mentioned, killed before the eyes of his lovely young wife in a senseless battle leading forty lances against the army of France . . . perhaps you prefer that picture?"

"Well, then let us go to Brittany and raise some troops. I have relatives in Brittany and you have friends. Oh, René, fight!"

"What's the good? That's all I've been doing since I was thirteen years old and I have found it to be the most useless occupation devised by man. Why should I fight? To keep Anjou? What do I want with it? This court is as stupid as the old tower in Dijon. Let Louis have it. It will suit his talents. I've always had a desire to be a wandering minstrel and this looks like a good chance."

Jehanne, who had sung the idylls of the open road, the green fields and the freedom of the shepherd with his pipe and maybe a few sheep, wept bitterly as she laced the bodice of her blue dress. René dressed carefully, with a shirt of mail beneath his leather jacket. For even a rollicking troubadour cannot be too careful.

He was singing gayly as he helped Jehanne through the postern—a chanson that he had given no thought these many years:

*"Oh, why should I grieve and pine and sigh,
When summer passes and winter's nigh
And youth must all too quickly die . . ."*

But there were tears in his eyes that Jehanne might have seen had she not been too busy weeping. He

looked only once at the slatey eminences of Black Angers and then did not turn about again until the woods hid the jet spires and dark towers from view.



AND so, seigneurs, they wandered on through the olive groves and over the green-brown fields of Provence until they came at last to the great swashbuckling tower of Tarascon. If the guards sleepily picketing the gate thought it strange that a king of Naples and his lady should come home unaccompanied and dusty and as ill-clad as any of the vagabonds in that region, they gave no outward sign. It was the nature of Provence to mind its own business.

A herald in a white-and-blue tabard stepped hastily to the wall and sounded a vigorous blast. The drawbridge came ponderously down. The portcullis went ponderously up. René and Jehanne passed into the castle between two haphazard ranks of ill assorted men in battered armor. And so began officially the rule of The Good King René in the region of the lower Rhone.

There never was another court like that of Tarascon and Aix. The Duke Charles of Lorraine would have disowned his son-in-law had he been alive to see it. The Duchess Margaret would have retired to her prie-dieu to ask that God might restore René's mind or take him out of the mad inconsequential environment into which he had thrust himself.

René disbanded all of the army of Provence save a baker's dozen of men needed for police duty about the castle gates and he paid no attention to the skill or appearance of the remnant. In the *salle des chevaliers* at Tarascon or in the hall of the guard at Aix, casque

and cuirasse rusted unheeded on dusty pegs. The stirring rumors of war that came from the north—reports that Charles the Bold had wrested Peronne and other cities on the Somme from Louis, reports that Burgundy was massing the greatest army seen on the face of the earth since the days of the Roman invasions, came to the sleepy towns of the Rhone valley as matters of no importance.

Troubadours—gay rascals with ragged elbows and amusing tongues, pilgrims from far lands, wayside philosophers, out-at-the-heel errants willing to put up their swords and dance a bit between wars, poets, painters, jugglers, mountebanks, singers, jesters, and what not of every description thronged the corridors and made love to the ladies and criticized the cuisine and the cellar. No tatterdemalion vagrant was too soiled or disreputable to find shelter with scores of his kind at Tarascon, provided he came to the gate with a lute in his hands or a joke on his lips.

Drill fields were remodeled into gardens in which René experimented with the raising of muscat grapes, and perennial blooms gave eternal color to the terraces. Where bands of free companions had once come questing service under arms, care-free ladies now adjudged the salesmanship of frolicsome peddlers of jewels and perfumes and silks and peacocks and laces and furs and honey and comfits. Over the fields lay the red cloak of the poppy flowers. Inside the walls was the atmosphere of a dream. Life moved like the shadow on a sundial and everyone was happy—save possibly René, the impresario of the glittering show.

Jehanne, living as she did the poesy of a particularly gay and amusing chanson, ruled over these strange subjects like the queen of the fables she had loved as a child. Her power was not great, her entourage was

small. But there was some advantage in that the carnival was continuous.

No call to arms broke in discordantly upon some well-executed cadenza. The quiet of the halls was undisturbed by the tread of mailed feet. If men contrived to get themselves killed with swords, as of course they did, such minor adjustments of opinion were performed in the wooded ravines of the Alpilles and never intruded themselves upon the riotous jollity of the castle gardens.

Here in Provence ruled not René but Youth—Youth enthroned on a comical worm-eaten stool carved from wood as old as the cedars of Lebanon—Youth crowned with chickweed instead of bay—Youth making faces at age and laughing at responsibility. And it was as consort of this king, rather than the lean swordsman she had married in Angers, that Jehanne, the bright creature of dance and song, found Life kneeling at her feet to pay her homage and bring her gifts.

Each morning she sought out her husband in his library where he had resumed the abstruse inspirational work dropped at the time of Isabelle's death. She always came in like the quick rush of the mistral, banging doors and throwing herself into his arms. She found it simpler to go through this ritual once a day than to be bothered with haphazard love scenes like those so common to other matrimonial combinations of her acquaintance.

"I love you madly, my husband," she would tell him. "Kiss me, you big bear." And then she would snuggle into his arms with the childish affection that was her prettiest accomplishment. He never failed to respond, for he had had wide experience in such matters. He would take her into his lap and smooth back her capricious curls and kiss her gently, while she

sighed luxuriously and stretched herself like a pet cat.

This scene over, she would look at the drawing he had just finished or comment enthusiastically on the latest pages of his book. Thus she demonstrated her continuing interest in art and literature despite the giddy distractions of the court. A farewell kiss, impetuous, passionate, and she would be gone to hear the most recently arrived singer from Languedoc or the frowsy poet then in general popularity. As for writing the verse that she had spoken of writing in Angers, she found no time for it.

René saw little of her save at their ritualistic meeting and at meals. He wandered through the gardens alone or sat at his window, listening to the revelry of the minstrels while he marveled at this strange being who was his wife. He wondered what he had expected her to be. The appeal to his loneliness had not deceived him, much as it had disturbed him emotionally. He had not really expected to receive her love any more than he had expected to give her his own. Jeanne Darc's memory had been between them. And yet he was not so sure. He had hoped that she might be an interesting companion, and deep and lasting affection might easily have sprung from such a companionship . . . But Jehanne was not a companion. She was Jehanne.

There were times when she became almost dutiful and then with an ingenuous display of remorse she would take him adventuring away from the court to play at shepherding by the broad Rhone or to dance with the simple folk in the river towns. There were other times when René slipped away from the noisy hilarity of the castle alone to direct some wilder and more spontaneous riot for the townspeople. Thus it came about that they found him leading the choir in

the pageant of the fabulous monster of the Tarasque, at Tarascon. He had written the music and designed the pièce de résistance of the carnival, the sweet-faced Tarasque itself. He was on intimate terms with most of the town before Jehanne, seriously alarmed at his absence, came in search of him.

His abolition of the army and the modest demands of his large but lackadaisical court enabled him to keep his retinue amused at a very low cost to the public. If crops were good, the Provençals brought in their taxes. If crops were bad, René never bothered to attempt collections. This saved the expense of tax-gatherers and even put a little balance in the treasury.

Etienne de Provence, who was nothing of a financier and therefore unable to understand this system, suggested that it might be economically unsound.

"To a certain extent I agree with you," said René. "Curtailment of taxes always makes people unhappy because it removes the target for their attacks on the government. Folks generally resent the amputation of their pet worries."

"I wasn't thinking of that," replied Etienne. "What people think is a matter of no importance. What they pay is vital."

"What difference does it make whether they pay or not?" countered René. And Etienne could not answer him.

.
You have seen the Alpilles, seigneurs. Between Tarascon and Arles they rise like stranded sea monsters against the sky, vast masses of white rock with a zone of red, restless as cloud phantoms in the sunlight, points of silver under the moon.

Atop the Alpilles stood the ancient seigneurie of Les

Baux, founded, so the best authorities have it, by one of the three wise kings who journeyed hither from Bethlehem. Here in this white city of quivering towers and fairy caverns Jehanne established a court of love.

It was an ideal place for such an important tribunal. Its mystic atmosphere lent a proper dignity to the sundry pleadings that were so great a contribution to the study of this widely popular subject.

Jehanne herself was president of the judiciary. About her as associate judges she gathered the most beautiful women of Provence and Languedoc. That they were honest in their momentous decisions no man can deny. Their reputation for impartiality was not long in spreading and lovesick troubadours from all over the world, came here for rulings on problems of the heart.

Before these ladies, stalwart lute strummers argued their cases in song:

A flirtatious damosel had winked at one and smiled at the other. The pair thus favored demanded an honest opinion of the court as to which evidence of favor was most to be credited.

Another minstrel took his zither in hand to prove that his lady was more beautiful than Cleopatra had been—presenting a case for decision that might have daunted a less carefully selected court.

There were troubadours who demanded writs of injunction against interfering husbands and there were interfering husbands who demanded a similar protection against the amorous lute players. Jehanne sat in her Grecian pavilion at Les Baux and puzzled her pretty head for hours at a time over these exciting points of law. It is hardly to be wondered at that she sometimes was absent-minded when René spoke to her

and that her passionate displays of affection became less and less frequent.

René was occasionally quite out of sympathy with Jehanne's request for self-expression in so excellent a work. In the great litigation of Wink vs. Smile he came close to making himself obnoxious by interrupting a discussion between the ladies of the court at the dinner table.

"Does the evidence show," he queried stupidly, "whether the lady who winked and smiled really knew herself which one she favored more than the other? Or has it been definitely established that she favored either of them?"

Jehanne looked at him coldly. It was obvious that the crass ignorance of René, once famed for his intelligence, had cut her deeply. It hurt her that he should thus parade his deficiencies before company. She was ashamed of him. After that she delicately avoided any debate on such matters when he was present.

.

The court procedure was not always a mere matter of legal and amatory knowledge. It had its thrilling moments quite outside the docket.

For example there appeared one day a masked knight in dark trappings who dismounted from a black horse before the rose-covered pavilion of the court of love and demanded a hearing. The litigants in the case on trial, a matter having to do with a lady's foot, gracefully took a continuance that the mysterious pleader might proceed.

His voice was muffled by the folds of his mask, but it was not a bad voice. His playing of the lute scored heavily in his favor from the start. And his chanson-construction received an excellent rating.

"I sing," he declared in his opening statement, "the love of a man who was quite like other men and of a woman who probably was quite like other women." The judges leaned forward. Obviously this was going to be a complicated case.

"This cavalier was loved by a woman—a beautiful creature with eyes as dark as the fairy grottoes of Baux.

"And he spurned her love . . . He cast her off, although he knew in his heart that he would never see another quite so lovely.

"And then he married—but not the woman who loved him. He had hoped for a companion in his loneliness. Instead he found only an acquaintance . . . A wife who smiled at him dutifully but at set intervals like the refrain of a chanson.

"In this household was not a woman but a female ambition, a beautiful creature who loved not man but men . . . a body physically chaste encasing a wanton soul.

"And he was true, this knight, to the woman to whom he had given his word, though by day and by night the face of the woman he had spurned so haughtily grew brighter amid the mists of the past . . .

"And there, ladies of the court, though I sang stanza on stanza about the heart of him who was lonely in the midst of gayety and starved for love in the midst of talk of it, I could present no more evidence. I rest his case with you and ask that you fairest of the fair decide the matter where his conscience has failed. Should he go on and on with the mockery of marriage or journey over the mountains and beg the pardon of the one he cast aside and take her to his heart . . ."

The court was silent when he had finished. Some of the ladies were all for postponing their decision until

they had threshed out the questions of evidence in conference. But Jehanne, always direct, picked the case to pieces with a few short comments.

"Your story, fair stranger, is utterly preposterous," she said. "That this man was as chaste as you imply is possible but not probable.

"Why should a man come to a court for a decision that is so obviously one of common sense? Granting for the sake of argument that there could be a man such as you describe, his wife should attempt to hold him or she does not deserve to keep him. If he is old-fashioned enough to interfere with her ambitions, his loyalty is a virtue of debatable value.

"He was wrong in spurning love, of course. What right has any man to spurn the love of a woman? What's to prevent his going back to her and apologizing on his knees for his lack of consideration? As for what might happen to his soul, should he make such a decision, that is not within the jurisdiction of this court. We are not theologians. . . . Call the next case. . . ."

In the castle at Tarascon, René hung his dark trappings on a hook and took from his mouth the bits of wood that he had placed there to distort his voice.

"I wonder," he debated with himself, "if little Jehanne is right . . . Shall I find happiness here amid all this hectic tomfoolery or had I better go back to Nancy and Yvette. Personal chastity has its problems."

Then he sat down to complete Chapter Fifty-Nine of the great work on "The Exemplary Life."

VI

TO this court of the dolce far niente came one day Boson the Marvelous to ponder on the futility of his old prophecies and to make new ones.

He was considerably older than he had been when he was merely a thousand years old. But his lack of teeth and his difficulty in walking were in no wise an impairment to his popularity in Tarascon. He was less opinionated than he had been in the days when René foregathered with him in the Hall of the Stag and if such a thing were possible in a great magician he had acquired something of a philosophy. Whether because of that or because of his entirely new set of amulets he foresaw a much brighter future for the world, and this was of course a great consolation.

Boson went of an evening to the Tavern of the Three Emperors. He found it a splendid relaxation after days spent in the courts of love. The townsfolk were a simple, happy, kindly people ready to pay him the respect that was his due as a sage, and so it came about that the Tavern of the Three Emperors was favored with his most important revelation.

It was after the fourth drink of muscat that his vision came to him. Moret the Mercer, Claudet the Sabot Maker, and Henri the Baker were gathered with him about the table discussing dreams of their own—dreams that came to one easily in the atmosphere of Provence.

"This King René is the wisest politician in Europe," commented Henri. "I been thinking it over for a long time and that is just what he is. The wisest politician in Europe."

"Smart no end," concurred Moret. And Claudet

murmured something to the same effect, although he was hardly intelligible.

"It's the taxes," went on Mons. Henri. "Everywhere you go outside Provence you hear people howling about taxes. But not here. The taxes don't amount to enough in a year to feed a horse."

"No army, that's the answer," put in Moret. "It takes a lot of money to keep a couple of hundred thousand louts without working. But this here René gets the idea that he can just as well get along without one. 'What good is an army anyway?' he says. And nobody can tell him. 'Very good then,' he says. 'We won't have any.'"

A cloaked traveler who had been sitting alone in a corner seemed suddenly interested at this. He got up and walked over to Moret's side.

"Did I understand you to say that René has abolished his army?" he inquired.

"Not exactly," replied Moret. "What I said was that he never had any. A lot of trouble and no earthly use."

Guy of Fleury, unofficial delegate of Burgundy in Provence pondered this seriously.

"I am only a traveler and not well acquainted with such things," he said. "But it seems to me that your King of Naples may get himself in a mess with propaganda like that. It would cause no end of trouble in the north if an idea like that got out."

"Why?" inquired the Great Boson.

"It's obvious," replied the traveler. "It would be a terrible blow to chivalry. Strike it at its very roots. Here Louis of France and Charles of Burgundy have gone to all sorts of trouble and expense getting a lot of soldiers together. Just imagine how they'd feel if somebody came along and told them armies were all

buncombe. There would be a lot of hard feeling."

Henri scratched his head.

"There may be something in what you say," he admitted. "It would be tough on the kings, but don't you estimate there are more people than kings. I kinda figure there might be a lot of cheering as well as a lot of criticism."

"The kings are the voices of the people," replied the traveler sternly. "The kings can strengthen the people by protecting them or they can weaken their kingdoms by abolishing defense."

And then spoke Boson.

"I am entirely in accord with the idea of King René," he declared as might a judge disposing of an obvious case. "You may believe it or not but he is the most dangerous man in Europe because he has his strength inside him. He isn't calling on a lot of foreigners with pig stickers to help him do his work. I said once that he would be heard from. And I repeat that. The man who carries his Destiny inside him doesn't need any armies."

"That hits me as an absurd idea," replied the stranger. But there was doubt in his brown eyes.

VII

FROM the north rumors of war. . . . Brittany, Normandy, and western Flanders at each other's throats to make the world safe for Louis XI. Louis enlarging his gendarmerie and waxing richer from the incomes of his seized estates . . . Charles the Bold, a sinister overtone to an awesome picture, conserving his resources, prepared and anxious for the final test . . . In Provence the lute and the poppy

flower and a care-free, irresponsible, futile life that closely approximated happiness.

The champions of the north called tournaments to parade their strength. At Tours the chivalry of France—King Louis' France—met in great festival and new stalwarts unseated tired knights who had been the opponents of René. At Dijon the cavaliers of the eastern French fiefs assembled for a more resplendent and more fiercely contested show of arms. At Tarascon René, smiling as Experience must always smile at the pomps of Egotism, sent out tattered heralds to proclaim a similar tourney.

All of the lower Rhone country turned out to see René's great pageant. Emissaries from the courts of Europe, disguised as jongleurs, but easily recognizable in their true capacities by reason of their unpatched garments, journeyed southward to view this exhibition and to discover whether or not it portended René's return to the saddle. Tarascom was host to thousands of men on the day when René stepped into the royal box and announced the opening of the fête.

It was an impressive sight. Beyond the jousting field the massed banners of a hundred contestants, a swirl of color against the drear background of the bulking castle—to one side the broad blue Rhone and beyond it the triangular towers of Beaucaire rising from a green cliff. The serious-faced delegates from the north kept apart from the crowd, eyeing the royal box and each other. They gazed intently at the pavilions far down the field and vainly attempted to puzzle out the mixtures of heraldry that appeared on the shields. The crests of every important family in France and Germany seemed strangely crossed with those of every unimportant and disreputable family. It was impos-

sible to decipher from the heraldic evidence just who these champions of Provence might be.

A trumpet sounded—a cracked blast like the laughter of a hyena. The herald who had played the King's call looked bewildered and raised his battered horn to repeat the royal message with what sounded like the voice of a screech owl. Then two knights, draped with all the hardware ever designed by armorers for such encounters, rode stiffly to the joust.

The military observers were a bit worried over the fact that these fighting men were seated astride small Provencal donkeys—and yet that might have been explained by the undoubted poverty of the country. A man could manage to get himself killed on a donkey, probably, as well as on an Arab stallion. But there were other things unexplained about this great game of arms. The knights rushed at each other with lances couched. Both points struck fairly and a tumult arose among the spectators. And then both lances bent almost double, slipped from greased shields and straightened out again with a peculiar whistling sound. The visitors made note of this point. Springy lances covered with padding and fitted with reed whistles were something entirely new in the history of jousting.

And so the events went on, thrilling combats with wooden swords, archery in which the novel arbalasts shot their charges in weird curves, lance duels in which specially prepared suits of wooden armor parted suddenly from casque to greaves. . . . Thus to a climax in which René, without a trace of humor in his war-hardened face, stood up to read another proclamation awarding the prizes and titles. He had much extravagant praise for the spirit of chivalry beneath modern warfare and the eternal rightousness of the sword. Almost word for word, his message was the same one

that Louis had read at Tours, except that no praise or recognition at all was given the still unidentified warriors who had taken part, while the King's most fulsome homage was bestowed upon "the painstaking asses who contributed so much to the success of the meeting."

The spectators then moved in a cheering mass into the town to complete the festival with an impromptu parade of the Tarasque.

Guy of Fleury, still disguised, watched the throng move down the white road and turned to Henri of Bordeaux, representing Louis XI.

"I always said that people who have been afraid of René are crazy," he declared. "I should say that this thing has been a burlesque and that René is indisputably crazy."

"It is *lèse majesté*," corrected Henri stiffly. "A vicious piece of propaganda for pacifism. This René is a dangerous agitator."

"It looks to me like a safe bet that Europe is safe from him," observed Guy.

And up in the Morvan where the unclean things were assembling for their unholy sabbath, the very young witch mumbled unrepeatable phrases over the fire and looked into the future.

"I see that René has just about caught up with his Destiny," she said.

"Yes," admitted her elder sister. "The finish is just about here. . . ."

Seigneurs, Tragedy wears the motley, and echoing laughter always sounds like a woman's weeping.

René went away from the fields of the tournament alone. Jehanne, amid the youths and maidens she had chosen for her retinue, had concerns of her own. He

wandered through the corridors of the castle noticing the echoes of his own footsteps. For it was quiet in the château. The servants, from the commander of the guard to the scullery maid, were out among the celebrants of the Cours National and the sounds of the distant revelry were a blurred whisper as they came to him through the thick stone walls. At the door of his library two messengers were awaiting him—one an Italian, the other obviously a Spaniard. The Spaniard deferred to the Italian, who followed René into the room and closed the door.

"I am Guido di Castelnouovo," he said. "I have come from Naples. Your people wish your return, your majesty. I can pledge you five thousand horse and as many foot ready to take the field under your leadership and drive Alfonso into the sea. You have only to choose and the crown of the two Sicilies is yours in fact as well as in name."

René put a hand to his face and stifled a yawn—for the merriment of the afternoon had been very tedious.

"No," he said gently. "I don't think I shall go back to Naples even to wear a crown."

"I understand, your majesty, that you have many concerns to occupy your time and attention. But we are not going into this thing hastily. We have laid our plans carefully and have arranged to suit our convenience to yours. You may have a week to reach your decision, your majesty, or a month, or several weeks, although your people are clamoring for you and will be impatient at any delay that keeps you from them."

René shook his head.

"My decision is made in advance for me," he said. "I am through with war and all that sort of thing. I

should love to be back in Naples where the people are so kind and generous and loyal. But even that wouldn't tempt me to go looking for a crown again. I've had enough of crowns and kingdoms. They interfere so seriously with one's lute playing. And besides my sword is all rusted."

The Italian looked at him with honest regret. It was plain that he had expected a different sort of answer.

"Your majesty knows best," he said lamely. "But if at any time you should change your mind, Naples will rise as one man to pledge its eternal fidelity."

"I know that," admitted René. "But I shall not change my mind. Wars do not appeal to me any more. I think I must be getting old. . . . And you might tell that to your Spanish friend outside. I think he represents the opposition."

"No, sire," said Guido. "I don't know who he is. He came in by ferry from Beaucaire after I had ridden in from the south. He did not tell me his mission . . ."

René was smiling broadly when the Neapolitan departed. There was something amusing about Naples and its phantom crowns—crowns that were like everything else in life, attainable when one no longer wanted them. The Spaniard was coming in now . . . Another ponderous ass with a serious face and obvious importance. . . . René prepared himself to listen to another boresome political disquisition.

"I am Pedro of Mavilla," said the newcomer. "And I bring bad news—sorrowful news."

"Pray don't apologize," said René. "For years I have heard no other kind and I am getting used to it."

"Nevertheless," declared Pedro, persisting in his

doleful attitude, "I must apologize. Had there been anyone else to send I certainly would not have come here with such a message . . ." And the fool started to weep. René fidgeted and showed his irritation.

"Come to the point, man," he ordered. "Let me be my own judge as to the sorrow of your silly message. I can't waste all night debating the etiquette of your motives."

"Well, then," answered Pedro, still hesitant. "It's about your son Jean of Calabria. He's dead!"

"What! Jean! . . . Jean!"

"It was a month ago, sir. . . . We fought a battle in the Pyrenees. He died with his harness on. . . . Died like a soldier, sir."

René's face was white.

"God!" he said huskily. "Jean dead . . . I can't believe it."

"It's a sad blow to me, sir. I was his best friend. I had to come to you, sir. Jean won his battle before he died but his little son died with him and so, you see, you are the only descendant of Queen Yolande left. You are King of Aragon, sire. And the throne is vacant."

René did not seem to have heard the message concerning the plight of Aragon. One terrible fact was before his mind. Jean was dead.

"It was like the boy to die fighting," he murmured. "He was a fine lad, Jean. There wasn't a finer lad in all Christendom. And he would have been a great man if God had spared him. I saw myself all over in him. I had hoped that he would gain the things that were always beyond my reach . . ."

They sat for several minutes in silence.

"You may take his future to yourself, your majesty," said Pedro suddenly picking up the thread of

the conversation again. "You will be as great a ruler in Spain as Jean would have been. And you will be as well loved there as you are in Provence. . . ."

René started.

"Aragon," he repeated as if he were just realizing the significance of the word. "Aragon! Another crown! And, dear God, Lorraine! I am Duke of Lorraine again with Charles the Bold standing on the frontier. . . . Peace! Peace! Where is there peace? Lady of Mercy intercede for a poor tired sinner! . . ."

VIII

THE news of the two messengers got abroad as such things will and the envoys of the North started home with matters of importance to incorporate in their reports. Jehanne came quickly to the castle where she found René seated at a long table with his head in his hands.

"I am sorry, my husband," she said as she put her arm about his shoulder and smoothed back his hair. He looked up at her only half comprehending. He might have expected sympathy from the Lady of the Firelight but he had long since ceased to look for the glint of the flame in the eyes of Jehanne.

"I hadn't expected such a blow as this, dear," he said eagerly taking advantage of her sympathy. I have never looked on Jean as a son . . . I have looked on him as my second self—going out to do the things I might have done . . . And now he is gone."

"Oh, please don't take it so to heart, my love," she said softly. "You hardly knew the boy, you know. Think of how much worse it might have been if he

had been with you always, so that you had really become attached to him, I mean."

René looked into her face, immobile and beautiful in the reflected light from the open door. But he read no understanding there. Jehanne was like the other women he had known—herself."

"I don't believe you get my meaning, dear," he explained to her patiently. "René d'Anjou had stepped out of life. He was sitting on a high mountain top watching his delegated ambitions and hopes go on toward fulfillment in Jean of Calabria. Don't you see? I loved that boy for the man I knew him to be. I didn't have to dandle him on my lap to know him. . . . And now there's nobody. Our line is coming to its ends and I am sitting here in the buffoonery of Provence—the laughingstock of Europe—a failure. There isn't any Jean now to avenge our wrongs and straighten out the mess I have managed to make of things. . . ."

At that moment Jehanne held in her hand the talisman of domestic Destiny. The proper word and René would have caught her in his arms. . . . And what might have come of that, seigneurs? Ask the Great Artist who even then was limning the outlines of a terrible canvas that would portray the crashing of an empire and a conqueror dead in the thickening slush. But one seldom speaks the right word, seigneurs. Jehanne smoothed back his hair a bit more energetically—this time with the air of an experienced mother who can see the triviality of the sorrows of her child.

"Now, I shouldn't let it upset me," she advised. "You'll feel better in the morning when you forget the loss and see the world before you again. You don't need anyone to shoulder your responsibilities. You

shall take Naples and then Aragon and we shall get Anjou back again and strengthen Lorraine."

He pushed her away, not quite gently.

"No," he said with an air of finality that was beyond argument. "I fight no more wars to satisfy your vanity or mine. I kill no more men to put on a throne a line that will die when I die and leave a heritage of war for those who follow me. Leave me alone, Jehanne, I want to think."

Jehanne was weeping when her women came to her half an hour later.

"The selfish, stubborn old fool," she stormed. "Two kingdoms for the taking and he won't have them. He'd rather sit here and play the clown than go out and fight like a man for his rights. He never gives a thought to me. I can work and scheme and pray to make him happy and contented but I have to stay here in this hole and be a make-believe queen when I might as well be a real one. That's always the lot of woman. She can't be the companion of her husband. She's nothing but a drudge and household furniture, without rights, without hopes. Oh, why did I ever let myself in for a marriage like this . . .?"

For many days, seigneurs, the lute of René d'Anjou hung untouched on its peg. The hectic jollity of the court was halted only momentarily by the death of Jean of Calabria. Why should minstrels and ladies of a court of love pass their days in a mockery of sorrow for a man they had never seen? They heard that René was grievously stricken and that he had given up Naples and Aragon to anyone who wished them and that he had so far forgotten his quarrel with De Vaudemont as to forfeit his claim to Lorraine in

favor of René II, son of his daughter, Yolande. . . . He had no eyes for the pretty ladies who, as usual, angled for kisses in dark corners, and the masques of Tarascon went off without his boisterous aid.

René himself felt dulled and wandered alone on the terraces by the river, staring over toward where the sun set behind the triangular towers of Beaucaire. He thought that he had reached his capacity for suffering. But, seigneurs, Tragedy works zealously and without thought of surfeit.

They brought word to Provence one day that Margaret of Anjou, the daughter who had allied herself with the house of Lancaster, had been taken prisoner at Tewkesbury. Her husband, Henry VI, and their son, had been killed. René put his soul in pawn to rescue her. And there were those who say, seigneurs, that he did not smile all that dismal winter.

IX

STILL the war drums rumbled in the North and still René clung to the pitiful wreckage of peace at Tarascon and Aix. A second delegation came from Italy seeking to entice him back to war and a throne in Naples. Then came a third. But his answer was always the same. Let other, less experienced men rise to this bait of crowns and such. It was simpler and less trying on the nerves to sit by a broad river and compose sprightly ballads or build up fine philosophical theories for his treatise on the purely hypothetical "Exemplary Life." And his tempters went home disappointed and convinced that his sorrows were preying on the good King's mind.

Seigneurs, who of you will say what is Destiny—or Loyalty—or Bravery?

Destiny may be the flutter of a white hand behind the lattice of a boudoir window or it may be a knife thrust in the back of a stranger in some far land. Loyalty may be what drives a man to death on a scarlet field for a many-syllabled generality, or it may be what prompts a man to shield a fallen enemy. Bravery is sometimes more manifest in the warrior who avoids battle than in the one who seeks it. René gave no thought to such matters. In his metaphysical researches he had not yet come to them.

And yet under the olive trees of Provence the map of Europe's future was being revised. Shadows of lances were falling across the rose trellises in the courts of love.

René's abdication of Lorraine in favor of the youth who bore his name brought him a letter. The Troubadour King read it carefully and laid it away, convinced that the sacrifice of a duchy was not so great. For the boy René who was just taking his place in Nancy was quite a bit like the boy René who had gone away from Nancy to follow Jeanne Darc.

René II was candidly thankful for his new honors, and boyishly frank in outlining his plans for the better government of Lorraine. He spoke enthusiastically of a plan for reducing taxes by curtailing the size of the army and relying for defense on a sort of militia system, the details of which he had not yet worked out. He did not know, nor did his benefactor, that the troops of Charles the Bold were already in motion toward the frontier.

Provence as always was the great land of laissez faire. Jehanne, who long ago had recognized the futil-

ity of ambition, went on with her singing and amatory legislation and was a kind, considerate wife to René when she thought about it and opportunity offered. The countryside was heavy with the white dust of the mistral and lazily content. The peasants prospered. René had the endless leisure necessary for one who wishes to write a complete survey of "The Exemplary Life." And there was little criticism of the government save from the armorers. You can't satisfy everybody.

Then Charles the Bold, tired of dreaming a great dream, tired of paying mercenaries for the time they spent solely in shaking dice in their billets, became annoyed at the political experiments of the young Duke of Lorraine and hurled fifty thousand men into the valleys of the Meuse and Moselle. All Europe thundered to the hoof beats of his cavalry.

Nancy prepared for a siege. René II fled into exile. Charles stood forth in fact as well as in theory the strongest chieftain in Europe. The great vision of the Valois was an accomplished reality. Burgundy, wealthy, arrogant, domineering, swaggered down through the middle of the western continent from the sea to the Alps, a geographical unit at last. The fugitive Duke marched from principality to principality begging for money and troops. All he got was moral support.

Word of his plight came to Provence and yawning courtiers discussed it between debates on the relative merits of chanson forms. An emissary arrived to ask King René for the aid so skillfully denied in Germany. But René was painting a new set of church windows and his great philosophical masterpiece was still unfinished. He dismissed the envoy with a few words:

"More war," he commented disgustedly. "Why do folks keep bothering me day after day with their wars? Isn't there anything else in the world for them to think about except war? I'd love to call out the army to help young René. But there are two reasons why I can't . . . The first one is that there isn't any army. . . . Money? I haven't any of that either. I haven't even a change of clothes."

The ambassador went back to Germany and his duke disheartened. But René II, who had not relied too strongly on his prospects of aid from an impoverished king, succeeded in making a working agreement with Bavaria and recaptured Nancy.

Charles, well aware that he could take back that portion of Lorraine whenever he wanted to, spaced his soldiery along the Aslatian border and prepared to follow the Moselle northward into the Rhineland. And there, seigneurs, the stage was set for an amazing anticlimax when the Emperor-Duke decided to rid his borders of dangerous malcontents with a sort of practice march against the negligible Swiss. Lorraine was virtually cleared of Burgundian troops in preparation for his punitive expedition. The young Duke took advantage of the lull to strengthen his defenses. The head of the Holy Roman Empire, thoroughly alarmed at the extent of Charles' activity, made frantic appeals to the Pope. The French armies, reinforced by Breton troopers who shared Louis' apprehensions, began to mass near Lyons. The world stood on the slippery edge of chaos. In Provence alone was peace.

The summer was nearly done when Jean de Cossa, governor at Arles, came into René's paneled hall at Aix. René was reading a letter.

"Well," said Jean fervently. "You can be glad

that you're so splendidly isolated down here. I have just come home from a trip to Lyons and I'd venture an expert opinion that there's hell to pay."

"I shouldn't wonder," said René.

"This Charles person has been building up a military machine for so long that he just has to use it, and I certainly have to congratulate you on keeping out of his way."

"Yes?" answered René noncommittally.

"I'll wager a lot of these vocal knights who used to laugh at you for being a pacifist wish now that they had studied your book. I told some of them how you kept Provence out of war by refusing to go crown hunting in Naples or Aragon. They admitted that Europe would be a lot better off to-day if more men had had your vision."

René looked up from the letter.

"This is from Lorraine," he said. "The boy René writes to me that Charles in making out his campaign schedule has assigned five days to breaking up the Swiss confederacy and only one for the taking of Nancy. Of all the arrogance! One day to take a town like Nancy with all the Nançois ready to defend it . . . The man ought to be put in his place."

"It's going to take a real fighter to put Charles in his place."

"Oh, I don't know. You shouldn't attach too much importance to any one man. One chief looks a good bit like another when he's dead. And I've seen some pretty good ones dead. He'd like to trail his Burgundian pigs through the Hall of the Stag. He'd like to chisel the Anjou arms off the gate. What bosh!" He sat for several minutes looking out of the window toward the ridges of the Alps, succeeding one another in strata of purple and blue and gray and white. . . .

"Yes, sir," he said. "If there were any soldiers left in France they'd have laid this upstart away long ago. . . . I'd like to see him try to take Nancy . . ."

From the apartment of Jehanne across the corridor came the voices of women in friendly argument.

"Now, I say," declared one lady in the soft slurring accents of the Provençal dialect, "that the duchess mentioned in yesterday's case showed more of a leaning toward the man to whom she gave the rose than to the one she kissed . . . She. . . ."

Jehanne's voice broke in authoritatively.

"That's a stupid argument," she stated. "The rose has been given an arbitrary value as an emblem of love . . . However, there's just one way to settle it. We'll convene the court this afternoon and decide the matter for all time. It is really an important point—vastly important—whether or not the rose is of greater value—symbolically, I mean, than. . . ."

René arose hastily and so did Jean de Cossa, surprised at his sudden movement. A second later the vaults were crashing with the echoes of a voice that had not been lifted above the conversational tone for years . . .

"Boy, fetch my armor . . . You'll find it in the closet under the stairs. Bring it here . . . Run down to the squadroom and wake up the guard—and then get me a horse. . . ."

Jean de Cossa's mouth was wide open but it was a long time before he got around to speaking.

"For the love of Michel," he gasped at last, "what are you going to do?"

"Me?" roared René. "I'm going to war. What about it?"



A RARE pageant, this latest masque of the Good King René. Provence thrilled at the novelty of it . . . A war, no less . . . A crusade against the Burgundians—whoever they were. War, even for tangible motives, would have been an exciting distraction. The Burgundian connection made it doubly novel, for Provence could not remember any cause for a quarrel with these people. And so the sleepy county which would have done much less interesting things at René's request went down into cellars and closets to find the rusted plate that father had worn, or grandfather. The troops, euphemistically so called, began to mobilize near Marseilles.

At Arles René conferred with the echevins. They listened with grave concern to his plea.

"I'd like to borrow a few men," he said. "Also a good stout horse or two and such armor as you happen to have available. The prospects for loot are none too good but we probably can wheedle our expenses out of Lorraine. I expect to return whatever you can spare me in good condition in a month or two."

"You are going to crush Charles the Bold," repeated the mayor stroking his chin thoughtfully. He was worried. Not that he doubted the feasibility of René's plan, but naturally he was concerned with the momentous results that such an expedition might avail.

"Yes," admitted René modestly. "I regret that some such drastic action is necessary. I have waited long and patiently for somebody else to do the job. But the world has grown lackadaisical since I was out in it. In the meantime Charles gets stronger every day. He has two hundred thousand men in the Jura

and as many more available. I'll have to get soldiers in a hurry if I am to do any good."

The mayor sighed. He felt a bit sorry for this Charles who might have put his talent for organization to some better use than the massing of so many lances in the Jura.

"We can promise you a couple of hundred men," he said after a pause. "And they are very good men. One of our boys could easily account for two Burgundians. There ought to be a hundred horses around here. Some of them are pretty old but from what I have heard about armies I am led to believe that army horses are better old. They are more sagacious. In addition to that we are prepared to offer you a hundred saluts d'or and a fine bombard which was made when the gunsmiths were really putting the material into bombards."

René bowed with dignity. He was a bit dubious about the bombard, and he knew that the couple of hundred men might total perhaps twenty-five on the muster roll. But after all, Arles would undoubtedly send a few good silk merchants and sailors to help him eliminate Burgundian militarism and the hundred saluts d'or would indisputably be one hundred saluts d'or.

"I thank you for your kindness," he said simply. "It is unusual, of course, that I should be ranging the countryside picking up a soldier here and a bit of coin there. But then life in Provence is itself unusual."

The echevins nodded sagaciously, each turning over in his mind the thought of what a fine story this would make when transformed by the years into the legend of how Boson or Guibert had been asked for aid by a king.

René, of course, would have been well within his legal rights had he chosen to raise his troops and horses

and money by means of an impersonal draft. But he might not have been so lucky. Provence was the great land of empty pockets where war had been forgotten so long that spontaneous enthusiasm for it was singularly lacking. And the loss of dignity entailed in a direct appeal for aid in this great adventure in Burgundy was negligible.

René knew the psychology of war. To-day a brace of reluctant knaves might join his colors for lack of something better to do. To-morrow would see a score following them with a holy zeal. Day after to-morrow the south of France would be howling for revenge on iniquitous Burgundy and firesides would be echoing to a weird recital of the uncommitted sins of Charles the Bold. It hurt him a little to think that this would be so. He had hoped to profit by experience and make this war a little different from the rest. But that was impossible. Wars differed only in tools, never in principles. So long as man might endure they would always be fought between two sides, both of which must be indisputably in the right . . . An excellent arrangement whereby the triumph of justice could be conceded from the first call to arms.

The towns responded readily to the King's personal call. St. Rémy voted five lances and a cow. Salon mustered a dozen men and a number of wagons. Martigues of the Marshes held a great meeting, passed resolutions condemning Burgundy for whatever it had done or was about to do, and sent twenty-five sailing men of assorted nationalities into the ranks.

From Valence and Vienne and Beaucaire and even Nîmes came graying knights with golden spurs who sat uneasily in creaking saddles.

The plains of the Camargue began to blacken with

troops of horsemen, tenders of the herds, leaving their charges to seek the fame they knew a pastoral life could never give them. That few of these men knew how to fight did not detract from their impressive appearance in the mass.

And so presently an army the like of which the world has never seen before or since, seigneurs, moved out of Provence toward the foothills of the Alps. At the head of them rode René, once more René the Warrior, a soldierly soldier, despite the rust that streaked the black and silver of his cuirasse, and in the vanguard a fine body of minstrels, tale-tellers and jongleurs recruited from the softer service of the courts of love. They did not know much about this silly war for which they had volunteered but the scenery was good, the routine novel, and the cursing captains much less exacting than the ladies of Aix and Tarascon.

At the tail of the column rumbled the painted wagons of a strange tribe from the shrine of St. Sara the Egyptian at St. Mary of the Sea. Bohemians, some called them. "Men of Rom" they designated themselves. They were a wild lot who spoke a tongue like that of no other men in the ken of Provence. They were pagans, it was whispered, a race of lost souls in the clutches of the devil. No one of the thousands who plodded along the mountain roads but knew them for soothsayers of exceptional talent, saved from summary action by the civil courts of Provence only through an illogical devotion to St. Sara, the Egyptian servant of the three Marys of the Gospels.

They were chanting the praises of St. Sara as they marched—a weird, interminable song that included many a word of commendation for devilish princes of their own peculiar ritual.

It was said by some that they had enlisted merely

to obtain an armed escort into newer and greener fields for thievery. The more generous of their companions at arms took them at their word when they said that they were ready to fight for the King who had built a shrine in honor of their patroness. At any rate they gave a touch of fresh color to the junkmen's parade of which they were a part, and contributed something to the upkeep of the morale by their vivid forecasts of an easy victory.

All in all, seigneurs, an army at the sight of which any man might marvel—lute players with the advance, fortune tellers at the rear. And it did not require so many seers to forecast how so haphazard an expedition was going to turn out.

XI

THROUGH the snow-swept, moonlit passes of the Jura staggered Captain Guido of the Lombard horse. Ahead of him somewhere was the Burgundian scouting party that he had led up from the marches of Nancy to spy upon the gendarmerie of Louis XI and the irregular troops of the negligible Swiss. Behind him were deep crevasses and bad roads and the remains of the horse on which he had tried to negotiate them. And all about him pressed down the impenetrable night.

"A plague on wars and Charles the Bold!" remarked Guido to the echoing mountains. "And double damn commanders who would send men away from warm fires on such an expedition as this . . ."

What were wars coming to anyway that men had to go out and brush elbows with the enemy in prepara-

tion for battle. It would be much simpler, it seemed to Guido, to sit down in some sheltered spot and wait for the enemy. If he didn't come so much the better. A silly idea this searching for him.

The reconnoitering of the hills had produced no result that Guido could see except the loss of his men in a blizzard and the loss of his mount in a canyon. So far as he could determine there wasn't a soldier between Nancy and the Alps. Somewhere over beyond Lac Lemman the Swiss would be mobilizing of course—they had been doing it for months and getting nowhere with the matter. About the borders, at Metz, at Toul, on the edge of Savoy, Louis' home guard was clustered, afraid to attack. . . . The Duke Charles could take Nancy unopposed by any considerable force outside the walls. Damn him, why didn't he do it instead of wasting all this time on mountain climbing.

Not a soldier in fifty miles. . . . And he'd tell that to Charles too—right to his face—if ever he could find his way back to the valley of the Meurthe.

And as he considered this prospect his quick ear caught the clang of armor—a bell-like sound tempered by the snow.

Captain Guido of the Lombard horse dropped quickly into a drift behind an overhanging rock considerably upset. Familiar sounds came to his ears over the moaning of the wind in the pines—the scraping of metal, the jingle of chain, the dull echoless beat of hoofs. . . . A considerable force, he decided—a thousand or more men—horse and foot. But what in the devil's name were they doing there? Whence had they come? What crazy notion possessed them to march by night?

A chill quite independent of the wintry weather stole over Guido and his teeth chattered in an expectancy of

terror. He could see shadows moving now, toward the upper end of the pass—black masses formless, changing, on the white surface of the snow. And then presently they emerged from the darkness beneath the trees into the moonlit reaches below him. He would have shrieked but his throat contracted as if a mailed glove had seized it . . . An army out of hell was on the road.

Riders in rusted, battered casques, in ancient cuirasses or parts of cuirasses, rode forward on bony nags that slipped and staggered on the ice. They rode bent in their rotting saddles as if urged by a terrible Destiny for which they had no liking. . . .

God have mercy! Guido knew them now. Dead men all of them . . . The dead men of Granson and Morat . . . Rusty, tattered, weary dead men called up by some devil's alchemy from the forgotten graves of a dozen battlefields.

There were hundreds of them—a rattling, creaking pageant of loose bones and ruined trappings. Their leader—a ghost in blackened steel—moved back and forth along the column and kept the gaps closed up with an efficiency that would have been creditable even in an army of live men and Guido felt no easier in his mind when it occurred to him that this semblance of military order was being preserved by necromancy.

It seemed to the shivering captain that the pageant would never pass. It came up out of the south. It moved across his vision into the darkness of the north—slowly, despairingly—as mercilessly and as inevitably as an avalanche just beginning to stir. Guido did not need a map or a glance at the stars to tell him that this tide of bones was flowing toward the valley of the Meurthe and that it boded disaster for Burgundy. He tried to take his eyes from the ghastly spectacle and

failed. He tried to rise to his feet, slipped in the snow, slid over the ice-covered rocks and came to a stop unconscious in the scrub pine alongside the trail.

When he recovered a chill dawn was breaking through storm clouds overhead. In the woods across the road a gypsy soothsayer was cooking breakfast in an iron pot. Guido got stiffly to his feet and accosted him.

"Have they gone?" he inquired.

"Have who gone?" demanded the gypsy.

"The dead men who were marching to the north on this road last night."

"The dead men?"

"Yes—the dead men in armor. . . . Or was I just delirious with the cold?"

The gypsy considered this question for some time before replying. The puzzled look vanished from his face and a crafty look came into his half closed eyes.

"You were right," he admitted. "They are dead men. You can hear their bones rattling around inside their armor. And their horses are all dead, too . . . Perhaps you noticed it."

Guido made the sign of the cross and tried to remember some prayers.

"How do you come to know about them?" he demanded.

"Simple enough," scoffed the gypsy. "My race do not mind the companionship of the dead. We make quite a nice thing out of our acquaintanceship sometimes . . . We can recruit such armies for a price—quite large armies—there are so many more dead soldiers than living . . . We can get you. . . ."

He broke off with a leer and returned to the more

interesting business of the breakfast in the pot. For Guido had suddenly shuddered and darted away from him.

In the valley of the Meurthe, in the plains and marches about Nancy, were the legions of Burgundy, unbroken, arrogant, dangerous. In their midst sat Charles the Bold and bided his time. Some day he knew the Swiss recruited by the young Duke of Lorraine, and possibly the army of Louis XI would move to attack. But Charles with all these thousands at his back, could afford to sneer at his encompassing enemies. Let them debate about strategy and manuever while the beleaguered city of Nancy died of starvation. He would be ready when they were.

Nancy—always a city of ghosts—was fast becoming a city of the dead. Its frost-covered turrets, white like skeleton fingers against the gray of the winter sky, stood always an eerie reminder of its terrible Destiny. One needed no imagination to envision the wraiths that sought shelter within its ice-enameled walls. There were plenty of tangible phantoms to be seen since Famine had come to take up his lodging in the capital of Lorraine. By day, by night, they stood on the ramparts, sentries so weak that they could scarcely drag themselves from turret to turret in the bitter cold of their watches—gaunt men, mere animations of bone and sallow skin who long since had abandoned protective armoring because of its weight. Charles might have taken the town in a single assault, had he thought it worth the while. But he knew that the threshold to empire did not lie inside the *Porte de la Craffe*. It was here in the open—here where the bickering allies presently would throw down the gage before him. Why waste men who might so soon be needed,

in doing a work that starvation was already pursuing to so satisfactory an end.

Christmas eve: Charles sat warming himself by a charcoal brazier while sentries marched somewhat noisily over the hard-packed snow outside. Hoof beats rang metalically across the frozen swamps. There was a rush of armor at the door of the tent and the Duke heard a spent voice quarreling with the guards . . .

"I must see the Duke," declared the newcomer. "Stand out of my way . . . I'm going in." And through the swinging flaps stumbled Guido of the Lombard Horse. Charles knew this Guido. He was an officer who had brought accurate, though unheeded information at Granson and Morat. Usually self-possessed and self-assertive to the point of insolence, he was now dead white and shaking like a man in a terrible fear.

"What's the matter?" demanded Charles without allowing the captain's uneasiness to affect him.

"I can hardly tell, sir," he said. "I thought I might have been bewitched and that maybe I shouldn't take up your time telling you about it. But then I decided that you would be the best judge and that you really ought to know. . . ."

"What's the matter?" repeated Charles testily.

"I have seen it in the moonlight of the passes near Lac Lemman and again in the mountains of the Jura . . . an army of dead men that comes up from the south. . . ." And haltingly but with infinite and convincing detail he told of his adventure in the pass. And Charles listened intently, seriously, before it occurred to him to laugh.

"Captain," he said at length. "It is the live soldiers we have to worry about. There is little danger

left in the dead ones whether they wear rusty plate or new . . . Dead men! Bah! Brings me news of the living."

Guido left the tent hurriedly, fearing the effects of the Duke's increasing ire. But Charles did not look after him. He was staring into space with a prayer on his lips. . . . An army of dead men jogging over the roads from the south . . . If they were the dead of Granson and Morat . . . the dead needlessly sacrificed to greed, overconfidence, and carlessness . . . there would be plenty of them.

.

Charles did not sleep well that night. He heard the watches on their endless rounds—midnight, one, two o'clock, and the solemn password of the sentries: "All's well! Pray for the dying! Pray for the dead!"

The formula was more than a mere haphazard grouping of words to-night. The Duke saw in the darkness of his tent the gruesome vision that had been in Guido's eyes . . . "Pray for the dying, pray for the dead."

Toward morning the Duke was awakened from a fitful sleep by an eerie rustling. He sat up drowsily and reached for his sword. He would have cried out for the guard and a light when a soft voice close to his ear stayed his action. It was a woman's voice and he vaguely recalled that he had heard it before.

"I was forced to come to you in the dark," his unseen visitor told him. "Your army is riddled with spies and if I were to be recognized my usefulness would be ended."

"I can well believe the story of spies," he said. "Your presence here is demonstration enough of what my army has come to."

"You wrong the watch," the woman answered.

"The men did not see me. I am never seen when I do not care to be. Anyway the loyal ones would have let me pass. I come to bring you aid."

"Any guard of mine who passed a woman through the lines at night would be killed as soon as I could get my hands on him no matter what she brought. However, you may state your business."

"I have come, Duke Charles, to offer you an unmolested passage into Nancy."

"Since when have the Nançois begun to trust their business to night-blooming wenches? They're worse off than I had suspected if they choose women for their ambassadors."

The woman hesitated before replying. But her answer gave no sign of pique at the Duke's brusqueness. Her voice was as musical as a lute and more appealing, although it was wasted on Charles, who had no ear for fine modulation.

"I am not the emissary of the Nançois," she told him. "For years I have been of service to Burgundy on occasions such as this. More than once I have performed feats for you that an army could not have performed. Your enemies have been my enemies and you have profited by my friendship."

"Nobody ever profited by a friendship with a woman. If he gained two soldi he paid a hundred saluts d'or. You had some motive for coming here aside from your intense and undying zeal for the cause of Burgundy. What is it?"

"A motive you probably cannot understand, my duke — Love!"

Charles laughed aloud.

"Love!" he scoffed. "Love for whom? Certainly not for me."

"Why not, your highness? Why shouldn't all

women love you? You are so gentle, so kind, so considerate. You are strong and brave but always the polished gentleman . . .” He felt warm fingers stealing over his face, a warm arm encircling his neck. He thought he could hear the rapid beating of her heart, but it was too dark to make sure that his senses had not been tricked.

“One more move, wench, and you’ll find a sword stuck in your gullet,” he said expressively. “I should hate to kill a lady in the dark, but don’t think for a minute that I shouldn’t do it if she came too close. I’ve managed to live a fairly healthy life to date by letting women alone.”

The whisper of a pellison told him that his visitor had leaped away from the bed.

“I shall confess, gentil duc,” she said from beyond sword range, “that I was not referring to you when I spoke of love. But I felt a momentary sympathy for you when you showed so plainly that you had never known the ecstasy and the pain of such an emotion. You are a good man, my duke, and I am a good woman. We should have much in common.”

“There are no good women over twelve years of age and you are older than that,” he contradicted. “And pretty soon you’ll be compromising my reputation with your endless chatter here in my bedroom. What’s the rest of your message?”

“I shall tell you, Sieur Duke, although you probably cannot understand. Love and Hate are very close together. A man repulsed me once. He was quite brutal about it, not at all diplomatic as you have been. And I spent the best years of my life revenging myself upon him. It would do you no good to know his name, for he is far from here now, a broken man who lives in poverty. All along I thought I hated him. I

could have killed him without a tremor of conscience. But now I am not so sure that I really hated. My hatred seems to have been merely a disappointed, hopeless love—a revolt against the conventions that kept me from him.”

“What rot,” observed the Duke.

“It’s natural that you should think so,” she returned. “But whatever the sensibility of the motive, that is what has brought me through the snow from Nancy to-night. It is what has led me to offer betrayal of a trust.”

“How it must rend the female heart to betray a trust!”

“It does sometimes, my duke. In Nancy I am known as the Angel of Mercy because I turned over my house to the sick and all of my food to the poor. The people love me. But in spite of that, Duke Charles, I am willing to lead you into Nancy for love of a man who did not love me—to end this wretchedness of the people he loved.”

“Really a complicated motive,” commented Charles. “And how do you propose to accomplish all this?”

“I know the captain of the guard at the little gate beyond the Porte de la Craffe. I could easily send him away and let you in with a few men for a rear attack at any gate you might designate.”

There was a clanging sound as a piece of gear fell upon a shield in the dark. The woman apparently thought it merely the result of the Duke’s turning suddenly and shaking the bed. The guard outside, however, picked up his sword and signaled for reinforcements. He knew that the sound had been a summons. Charles guffawed whole-heartedly.

“So that is the kind of fool the Nancois think me,” he commented. “Did you honestly believe that any

woman could make me the victim of a trick so wormeaten as that one? A light, Reyault! This woman must be the most beautiful creature in the world . . .

A torchbearer and three soldiers spilled into the tent to disclose an odd scene.

Charles the Bold was sitting up in his bed. A spectre in black cowered against a rack of arms in a vain attempt to escape the light. Charles looked at her with increasing amazement.

"Yvette de Souigny!" he ejaculated. "Who would have believed it!"

The woman abandoned her concealment and stepped into the rippling illumination of the torch with a boldness that approached insolence.

"Well," she inquired, "what of it?"

Charles sneered.

"No wonder you came in the dark," he scoffed. "I suppose this is tragedy to you but if you are honest—as the world knows you are—you must admit that the situation has the elements of humor. . . . The once lovely Yvette de Souigny attempting to defeat the ravages of years and early piety by becoming a soft voice in the dark . . . Still the genius, Yvette, although a bit decayed. Sex, the mysterious, draping herself in shadow with no lure but her mystery. . . . That's a poetic thought, isn't it. Yvette, I almost admire you."

"I could kill you for that," said Yvette and for a moment the old fire flamed in her sunken eyes.

"I have no doubt of it. In that respect and in the purely female instinct that prompts you to go about the world doing good, you will never grow old."

"You are a boor," replied Yvette. "All of my life I have been working for you . . . burning myself

out in your service. Your father would not have treated me like this."

"Better not be too sure of that," cautioned Charles. "Father had a nice eye for the ornamental and to be quite candid with you, my dear, you are no longer that. However, it appears to be obvious that you were sincere in offering to betray Nancy. Only the supreme egotism of a lady who refuses to believe her mirror or the calendar could have sent you on such an errand. The captains of Nancy would have known that I am proof even against the fair and rosy wenches, let alone the scrawny and yellow ones."

"That is quite likely," she returned easily. "Woman appeals only to men of intelligence and imagination, whereas you are a stupid and insufferable ass."

The guards stood open mouthed at this *lèse majesté*. But Charles merely grinned. He would not let it be said of him that the inconsequential chatter of a female had ever aroused his ire.

"The years sour the temper as well as the appearance," he observed. "However, I can't argue with you. You are keeping me awake. Reyault, take this lady through the lines, and kiss her good-by for me. I am woefully delinquent in such duties and still I should show some appreciation for her kindness . . . You may not find it such a task. I have heard that all women are beautiful in the dark. . . ."

And he deliberately settled back into the covers and turned his face toward the striped silk wall of the tent.

Yvette followed the man he had designated toward the door. There she turned to address herself once more to the immobile figure on the couch.

"It is my punishment that I have lost my charm," she said, "And my sin that I have served your house."

He did not reply. She followed the soldier out

into the night toward Nancy. A detail of the guard came to join them and they walked along for some time in silence.

"Do you know," said Yvette at length, "I am honestly sorry for you boys."

"Forget it," advised the corporal of the guard. "You can't bribe us."

"Bribe you," scoffed Yvette. "Why should I be bribing poor, half-witted oafs like you . . . You are too pathetic for words. I was just wondering if you heard what I did while I was waiting for a chance to get into the Duke's tent . . . You can ask Captain Guido about it if you don't believe me. An army of dead men is marching up from the south."

"What!" half a dozen voices were in the chorus.

"Don't mention it to a soul," cautioned Yvette. "I wasn't supposed to hear it and so of course I oughtn't to be talking about it."

By daybreak Captain Guido had to be hustled out of camp and the fine army of Burgundy was on the verge of panic.

XII

THROUGH the snow and ice marched the troops of Provence. Those that remained in the column were hardened warriors—veterans since the food supply had dwindled to almost nothing two weeks ago. Many of those who had started lay dead along the glistening roads that led back toward the olive groves of the south. Some had deserted. The others went on and on, convinced that a battlefield could show them no terrors worse than those of the blizzards.

White sun on the white snow—a gorgeous dancing fire that stunned the eye but gave no heat . . . Frigid cathedrals buttressed with ice . . . Cold blue peaks . . . Cold blue canyons . . . The chill of death . . . The soldiers looked at the spectacle with the eyes of Provence, remembered the warmth of the Midi and moved on mechanically through the deep green shadows that existed only in numbed and rebellious vision.

They rode bent in their saddles, rustier than when they had started. Icicles hung from the bridles and thick frost gave every cuirasse a sheen of silver. They were like the dead men Guido had described to Charles, hollow-eyed, gaunt and cold.

Toward the close of the journey they marched by night preferring the possibility of death through a fall into a crevasse to the certain result of a bivouac without sun and shelter. By day they camped sometimes in the wretched hill towns of the glacial passes and sometimes about fires that rapidly sank from sight in the drifts.

René, whose bones ached and whose muscles long ago had become too cold for further protest, drove them for hour on hour without signs of fatigue. Years of minstrelsy had not changed the soldier.

"I should think," grumbled Jean de Cossa, "that you might have picked out something warmer than this Burgundian expedition. I don't think I have any toes left on my right foot and I lost an ear last night."

"It is a bit hard," admitted René cheerfully. "But it will be an experience to tell about for those of us who get home to an appreciative audience."

"I don't think very many of us will get back."

"Nonsense! Didn't you ever fight in the cold before?"

"Oh, yes. I was up in Piedmont for a campaign where the snow was twenty feet deep. There hasn't

been a snow like that since. And there wasn't any food. We lived on berries and bark for a week . . . I remember . . ."

So the stories of hardship were spun out in proof of the fact that Jean de Cossa had really been a soldier. His tales of horror had little to do with battle and much to do with armies and René listened cheerfully, convinced by this quirk of a veteran's psychology that Jean's service had been active.

"But I can't say that there's anything particularly romantic in an affair like this," the general said. "I don't see much poetry in fighting a Burgundian to capture Nancy. . . ."

"Nancy was a wonderful city when I knew it," René replied. "For many years it was the rendezvous of the most beautiful women in the world and perhaps is yet. There was one interesting creature who should be in evidence before this expedition is finished. I really believe that I should like to see her again . . ."

"Ah, I thought so . . . There is always a woman somewheres in war. A long distance love makes us the enemies of Charles of Burgundy."

René laughed.

"Yvette! Love!" he repeated. "No, you are wrong, Jean. She was my Destiny . . . A beautiful Destiny but fearfully trying. I don't believe I loved her. I probably hated her. One always hates his Destiny. But I couldn't be sure. She quit meddling in my affairs so long ago. I wish my hands weren't so nearly frozen; I could tell you this so much better to the accompaniment of a lute. . . ."

The ice walls of the pass echoed to the grumbling of the soldiers—complaints about the food, the camp sites, the distance between halts, the condition of the horses, the conduct of the war—all of the thousand and one

little criticisms that are the outward mark of the well-disciplined and seasoned warrior.

"Look at me," mourned an archer who a week or two ago had never seen a crossbow. "I was brought up in the Camargue. I been horseback riding since I was knee high to a duck. And what do they put me doing? They give me this thing and dare me to shoot it . . . And they got a grape picker up there shoeing horses. That's the army!"

Another voice bewailed the treatment he had received at the hands of a semimilitary organization whose wagons, back among the gypsy carts, had been equipped by the women of Arles and Tarascon and Aix with bits of fougasso and a few casks of muscat. "They charge me a week's pay for some salt to put on my piece of roast horse," he declared indignantly. "An' then they expect me to help sing a lot of songs about the old folks at home. . . . Me, I know a better song about a one-eyed skirt who lived in Avignon. I'll sing it." And he did, although the words need not be repeated here.

A cavalier from Languedoc was telling a story:

"And this Pedro the Lancer was lost for five days. Everybody thought he was dead. You know he might have been. Maybe his name was Georges. I forget.

"Well, this Georges or Pedro, or whatever his name was, got lost for five days and then one morning he shows up and the captain says: 'Where you been?' And this Pedro—I guess his name was Pedro—not Georges—he says, 'Well,' he says, 'when we attacked the Milanese somebody stuck a halberd through my cuirass,' he says, 'and I went looking for a new one. And would you believe it,' he says, 'I had to kill fifteen Milanese before I found one that would fit.'"

"I've heard that one before," announced another

voice to the accompaniment of chattering teeth. "Only the way I heard it, it was a story of how one of General Jule Cæsar's boys lost a shoe . . . I never did believe that story anyway."

"I saw Pedro myself," maintained the horseman beligerently. And I was there when he come in. 'Captain,' he says, 'I had to kill seventeen Milanese before I could get a cuirasse that would fit.' He says it just like that and I can lick any oaf in this outfit that says he didn't."

And so went conversation while the cold left only the strong men in the ranks and the army of Provence rode on toward Nancy more enthusiastic every day and looking more and more like the army of dead men that Guido had seen in the high passes. Most corpselike of all those living cadavers was René d'Anjou, yesterday the gentle troubadour, to-day the slave driver who showed no mercy.

XIII

JANUARY Fifth—"The Vigil of the Kings . . ." Charles the Bold, intrenched to the south of Nancy and west of the Meurthe, knew that the battle was at hand. Shortly after dawn his outposts had been driven in through a blanketing snowstorm to convey the exciting news that René II and his negligible Swiss had arrived at Laneuville and that a considerable force was driving through the swampy ground of La Malgrange in a maneuver to turn the Burgundian right flank. Charles distributed his troops in three main divisions straddling the road to Laneuville with his archers massed on the left and right after the English fashion.

Thus they waited in the blizzard for the attack that they knew must come within a few hours.

There was a vague uneasiness in the Burgundian ranks—rumors of a masked attack by the French from the southwest, rumors of treason, the old rumor rapidly gaining credence in minds fired by the imminence of death, that an army of dead men was approaching on the left flank. And in the silence of the snow these veteran warriors, in numbers, training and equipment as fine an army as Europe ever will see, seigneurs, lay shivering on their arms like men awaiting doom.

Charles rode up and down the lines, inspected the bombardiers, archers, footmen and cavalry and seemed well pleased with his prospects. He was in buoyant spirits now that the tedium of waiting was about to end. He could begin now to take up his plans where the unfortunate accident of Morat had left them. He would defeat the Swiss as soon as possible in the afternoon and then give his attention to more serious pursuits. A quick withdrawal after the victory, he thought, would put him in Metz by morning after a surprise attack on the French. This maneuver, of course, was dependent on the speed of the negligible Swiss. He wished for a moment that they were better warriors so that they could show some agility in their advance through the swamp. It was likely to be uncomfortable here in the blizzard if they were too long about it . . .

Then the snowfall suddenly ceased and the sun broke through the clouds like a signal for battle. Charles could scarcely believe his eyes, for out of the tails of the storm had swept a troop of pikemen, with other pikemen ranging up the slope behind them in ghastly array. A bombard cracked in the Burgundian lines, turned over, and killed two of its crew. The negligible

Swiss came down the hill, a landslide of green and iron.

A hedge saved the Flemish, Croatian, and Spanish Burgundians from annihilation before the battle was technically begun. The pikemen of the attackers found themselves entangled in the brambles when Charles, maneuvering quickly, sent forward his archers. Many of the negligible Swiss died there in the hedge, pierced through their queer breastplates by Scottish arrows or trodden under foot by the impatient throng that pressed them from behind. Served them right for beginning such an important fight without a word of warning!

French cavalry, generously loaned to the young Duke René by his disinterested friend Louis XI, cleared the field by the elemental strategy of riding down most of the negligible Swiss who had escaped the Burgundian archery. A thousand horse, led by the Sieur de la Rivière, charged out of the Burgundian camp and met the oncoming troopers with lance points down. And presently the day was made brighter by the scintillance of French armor covering the slope as the King's cavalry took to flight.

In the center the main column of the confederates struck the Italian Burgundians and Baleotto, the commander, immediately conducted a skillful but not too judicious retreat. Campo Basso grew suddenly tired of fighting the battles of Charles the Bold and elected himself custodian of the bridge over the Meurthe on the road to Buxières. After that the battle became a personal affair with Jacques Lalain gallantly holding the center for Burgundy and La Rivière's hellions making the going uncomfortable for the Swiss on the left flank. Charles, once more confident of the end, bored into the mass at the center trying to find René II

or the Swiss leaders and settle the affair as quickly as possible by killing them off.

Burgundy at that moment stood on the threshold of empire, seigneurs. Charles, fighting like a maniac, felt victory already within his grasp. And then some fool on the left flank set up one of those cries that make defeats. Terror stayed thousands of strong sword arms as the word echoed along the lines:

"They are here! The army of dead men! They are charging along the river from the south!"

And then suddenly it came. . . .

An army of dead men . . . Charles himself blanched at the sight of it: rusty armor covering a vast field, scrawny horses with flaming eyes, riders who might have been men or skeletons beneath their spotted, scaling plate. Charles thought he could make out a pennant in those ghastly ranks—the white and blue of Anjou. But the snow had begun to fall again and he could not be sure.

His center was wavering. Action had ceased on his right flank. His left flank broke and then was swept away in a terrorized rout as the plodding corpses of the ludicrous reinforcement crashed into the charge.

Charles the Bold, Emperor-Duke of Burgundy, was swept back toward Nancy in the rush of his own men.

The routed mercenaries fled to the west of the city to get onto the Luxembourg road where the retreating would be less hampered. A few in the path of the graveyard army sought to cross the river on the thin ice and so died prematurely.

Citey, Contay, Croy, Lalain, the finest lances of Dijon, deserted by their comrades, stood fast as the flood of battle passed them toward the north. They

turned then without a word to follow the fleeing army. One by one, willing swordsmen gave them death.

And so at last Charles the Bold rode virtually alone in the wake of the storm. He was already planning for an immediate mobilization of his defeated army on the edge of Luxembourg and arranging tentatively the details of a maneuver that would give him a stronger center and wider wings for his next encounter with the negligible Swiss. Defeat! Why give a thought to that in what was so obviously another accident. Burgundy was not beaten—could not be beaten even by troops recruited from moldering tombs. That was Destiny.

Then he was suddenly conscious of a figure looming before him—a familiar figure on a black horse, a warrior clad in armor that had once been black and silver and now was a piebald pattern of red and tarnish with a jeweled filigree where the frost had etched it.

Charles reined his horse so abruptly that the animal fell back on its haunches. He raised his sword, but the motion was mechanical. The Duke's attention was fixed upon the weird figure in front of him. Then the stranger lifted his visor.

"On guard!" advised René. "And don't be too surprised at seeing me here. It will ruin your technique."

Charles opened his casque and laughed sneeringly.

"Somebody should have killed you after Bulgniville," he said. "It would have saved me the annoyance of killing you here when I have so many other more important things to do. I knew you were going to make trouble . . . But they had to turn you loose in spite of my advice so you might muster your corpses here to-day. Well, devil take you, René. I feel sorry for you. It's such a cold day to die."

He dropped his visor and spurred forward. And

two long swords flashed like icicles through the snow. The knell of an empire was tolled in the bell-like echo of tempered blade on tempered blade. . . . The din of battle was becoming dimmer in the north. The chime of St. Georges in Nancy was clanging dismally. The blizzard shut out the town, the earth, the sky.

XIV

DUSK was gathering when René stepped over the threshold of the little house by the Porte St. Georges and stood peering through the thin candlelight at the woman only half visible in the shadow.

"René," she murmured in a voice that he scarcely heard. "René, are you alive or dead?"

"A difficult question, Yvette," he said. "I think I am alive because it has always been my misfortune to come out of battles in that shape. I should have been well off out of this vale of tears long ago, what with your kindly offices and the well-intentioned but unskillful work of Charles le Temeraire."

Still she stared at him uncomprehendingly.

"How did you find me?" she asked.

"Perhaps it was instinct . . . Perhaps it was because I questioned the old guardsman at the gate. Perhaps it was because I remembered that this used to be a part of Sampigny's house. I heard your name mentioned and I knew you'd be around here somewhere. Anyone who knew you could guess that you would not be far from Burgundian headquarters and that you would be leading an edifying life in the house of Charles' enemies."

The woman's voice was tremulous when she

answered. René detected a quality in it that had never been there before . . . A note of helplessness and lost hope.

"How you must hate me!"

"No," disagreed René. "I don't think that I do. In fact I have always admired you greatly, my dear. And why not? Nobody in the world has had greater reason to appreciate your talents.

She started to weep.

"Go ahead," she told him with tearful resignation. "Go on with your irony. You won't believe, I suppose, that I tried to lure Charles the Bold to his death here to prevent this battle, that I tried to be a traitor to the house I had served because I loved you. . . . You won't believe that."

"No," admitted René with an air of confidential frankness. "Just between you and me I don't think I shall."

"Well, it's the truth. Charles would have come here to his death if he hadn't suspected me."

"I can well believe that part of it."

"And I have always loved you. I have loved you since the night when you killed de Sampigny."

"You have given such a touching demonstration of it!"

"Well, if you didn't know . . . if you didn't feel some affection for me, what prompted you to come here."

"To be quite candid with you, my dear, I haven't the faintest idea. You always interested me, or shall I say you always kept me interested. And you are a beautiful creature, Yvette. A man could hardly forget that."

She shrank farther back into the shadow.

"What do you intend to do with me?" she asked.

"I hadn't given the matter much thought," he replied. "Of course I ought to see young René and tell him you are here . . . Not to have him disturb you, you understand, but merely to enable him to give you the attention warranted by your standing in the community."

"He will kill me if he finds out who I am and what I have been."

"Bosh! One doesn't go about killing women. Femicide has never been popular because of the difficulty of finding out where to begin."

"I am a poor, friendless woman, René. My life has been one long series of disappointments and I can't hope for happiness in the few years that remain. . . . But don't take peace away from me, my king . . . Don't make me wretched because I have been unfortunate enough to love you."

And then the fire on the hearth, caught in a sudden draught, flared up. The shadow fell away from the woman like a discarded garment and René peered in open astonishment into the face of the haggard creature who had been Yvette. She hung her head.

"I hoped you might go away without seeing," she said. "I hoped that you would always remember me as I was when you kissed me by the firelight."

René moved forward and seized her hand.

"I shall always remember you that way, my dear," he said. "To me you shall always be the most amazingly beautiful creature I have ever known. And I shall not tell the Duke . . ."

He kissed her good-by as he left to join his battered column assembling near the bridge on the road to Essey. It seemed to be the only gentlemanly thing to do under the circumstances.

:

He was humming a song that seemed to have nothing to do with battle and victory as he guided his horse along the column:

*"Oh, why should I grieve and pine and sigh,
The summer passes and winter's nigh,
And Youth must all too quickly die . . ."*

And then another chanson with a more lugubrious melody:

"Lady of Firelight, many men follow you . . ."

.

They found the body of Charles the Bold face down in the ice of the marsh southwest of Nancy—Mathieu, a Portuguese physician, the boy Colonna who had served the Duke as a page, and several mercenaries from the routed army. Identification was not difficult once they had cut away the ice. A single sword thrust between the plates under his chin had finished him much as a similar stroke had ended the career of one Sampigny these many years ago. . . .

They took him away and buried him, and his empire with him.

XV

AT Tarascon a one-legged sentry who still showed signs of resentment at having been debarred from René's expedition by his slight physical infirmity, arose wearily from his bench and sounded the horn. The lord of the castle rode under the arch. Jehanne came leaping down the stairs two at a time to

meet her husband. The things she had intended to say to him were forgotten in the excitement of his unexpected arrival. It was obvious that the silly campaign must have gone amiss. It was almost with sympathy that she threw her arms about René's neck and kissed him.

"So my boy has come home," she greeted him in the tone that an indulgent mother employs in speaking to her first three-year-old. "And his old war turned out all wrong, just as I said it would . . . Well, never mind, we'll have a good time here. There's going to be a big ball next Tuesday and we have some of the cleverest jongleurs at Les Baux that you ever saw. . . ."

"But, my dear," protested René, "it wasn't so bad. . . ."

She interrupted him with a laugh and a kiss.

"Oh, don't bother explaining to me," she advised. "Why, you silly old goose, I knew how it was going to turn out. The idea of your going off on a trip like that—a man used to the sort of life you've been leading. I never heard of such a thing. I could have told you in advance how far you'd get, and next time I suppose you'll be ready to take somebody's advice."

He shook his head hopelessly.

"How far do you suppose we got?" he asked her maliciously.

"I don't suppose. I know how far you got. You didn't even get started. One of the gypsies came here right after you had passed through Grenoble and he told me how you had decided to stop in the foothills."

"Well, we didn't exactly stop. We went a good piece farther on."

She laughed until the tears started in her lovely eyes.

"Honestly," she said, "I never saw anything funnier than that mob of old iron ware. And if you knew how funny you were yourself you'd never look into a mirror again as long as you live. If you could only get your army together once or twice a year it would leave the comical masque of the Tarasque without a spectator. . . ."

If Jehanne had been just a bit older she might have noticed a peculiar look in René's eyes.

"Did you miss me?" he asked.

"Of course I missed you," she declared. "How could I help it? This was the dullest place in Europe while you were away. You took every troubadour in Provence, to say nothing of all the cavaliers. We had to amuse ourselves spinning and you know how I hate spinning."

"And you didn't believe I'd make a go of it?"

"Oh, my love, how could I? Hadn't I lived with you all these years? Don't I know how fitted you are for battles and all that sort of tosh? I really ought to be angry with you. But I shan't. You will have sense enough to stay at home now and play the lute. So after all it makes no difference."

René leaned against the arch to ease a pain in his chest where the sword of Charles the Bold had proved the inefficiency of Burgundian fencing methods by missing his heart. He thought of Charles lying in the slush ice of the marsh and of the army of Burgundy flying on toward perdition ahead of the "dead men" from Provence.

"I suppose you are right, my love," he said. "It makes no difference. . . ."

Jean de Cossa followed René to the *salle des chevaliers* to help him out of his gear. The *mistral*

was blowing a bit crisply and a log was burning on the hearth. René kicked off his greaves and stood staring into the flames. There were pictures in the fire, pictures of beautiful faces and men on horseback, flashing arms and langourous gardens . . .

The groined vaults of the ceiling were already dark with the shadows of early twilight. . . . It was quite like the Hall of the Stag, this room. Only Boson was missing. . . . Boson with his somber manner and impressive amulet.

"Life," said René suddenly, "is a series of lost loves."

De Cossa grunted.

"Love," he objected, "is a series of lost lives."

"A poor epigram but fair philosophy," René criticized. "However, it sounds to me like an old man's complaint."

"I suppose it is. We don't get any younger, René. God help me! If I could only have my youth back and still know what I know now, I could be king."

"Yeah, and what a price to pay for being a king. To be young again and still to know the futility of ambition. To read the truth in laughing eyes. To sense the lies on the lips we kiss. To be young again and face the long march toward the grave all over . . . Not for me, Jean. Ignorance and Age are life's greatest blessings."

Through the wide corridors trickled the notes of a love lyric and the happy laughter of women. René unbuckled his cuirasse and looked at it interestedly as he balanced it on the bench before the fire. It was the same armoring that he had shown to Boson that night in the Hall of the Stag, rusty now but still intact. Here was a dent that recalled the attack on Metz, here a scratch that De Sampigny had engraved, here a me-

mento of the alley fight on that last night of his reign in Naples, here the mark of a tourney, here the autograph of Charles the Bold, here a hole that brought back with a rush the picture of Orléans and La Pucelle. . . . Orléans and La Pucelle. . . .

"A fine piece of armor, Jean," he said. "Toledo plate and Burgundian chain. They certainly put the stuff into that cuirasse—and workmanship. No sir, they don't make armor like that nowadays. . . ." And he bore it tenderly to the rack to hang it up forever.

He took down his dusty lute and tuned the G-string as he gazed with a reminiscent smile at the faces in the fire.

THE END

Lovely Ladies

*Being the Love Affairs of Ten
Women in the Life of a
Young Man*

By FERRIN L. FRASER

HERE is an old saying, "In love and war, there is safety in numbers." Such proved the case with Billy Everett, for he had his loves and his lovely ladies in numbers. But in the end, woe to tell it, the very weight of their numbers was his downfall.

Billy, being a man withal, with a million dollars lurking about him, and an irresistible smile, Love selected him as a perfect One upon whom to manifest its varieties of charms. There was the throbbing, racing love; the quiet, tender romance in a summer garden; the intrigue of a sophisticated affair with a lady who was married and wished she weren't; the daringly fascinating elopement to a revolutionary ridden island far out in the south Atlantic. There were others too, in which drama, emotion, comedy played with him high and wide.

Contrary to logic and reason, too many loves did not spoil the lover, but whetted his appetite for "la grande passion." A smart story.

Price, \$2.50

J. H. SEARS & COMPANY, INC.
Publishers

114 EAST 32ND STREET

NEW YORK



New Entertaining Fiction

MOVE OVER

By E. Pettit

A daughter of wealth marries a plain young man from the West. He is dazed by the loose morals and mad whirl of Society. Written with biting satire, it caricatures "our better classes."

\$2.50

SAN FAIRY ANN

By Hugh Kimber

This is a story of fighting under the rockets' glare and the roar and heat inside the tanks. But lyrical love persists amid this agony, and blossoms forth in a peaceful Canadian valley.

\$2.00

THE JEWELLED HERD

By Ida M. Evans

A young couple, facing financial disaster, found a cult which the jeweled dowagers eagerly adopt. Success engulfs them, but their equilibrium is restored in the wide open spaces of Idaho.

\$2.00

CHINESE WHITE

By David Calder Wilson

This is a vivid, living tale of modern China with its rebellions and civil wars. Against this colorful background of the East blossoms a romance between two of the West.

\$2.00

WET WEATHER

By Hilary March

An adroit, young journalist sets out to expose a scandal, but finds himself innocently entangled in another plot. An enticing story of madrigals dancing in the hearts of two ardent people.

\$2.00

Complete Descriptive Catalogue of our Publications
will be mailed upon request

